

Author's Note

Most of us go through twelve years of grade school. Many of us go on to college, even Graduate school. We get certifications for various jobs. We get licenses to drive vehicles, to drive a forklift, to practice medicine, law, or begin other careers. Most of us, however, are parents longer than we are anything else. And yet, very few of us have any useful, organized training to be really good at this life-long job called "Parenting." Parenting is the toughest job for which most people never have any training.

As a clinical psychologist, practicing school-clinical child psychology for over thirty-five years, I have come to appreciate the value of conveying certain immutable truths about parenting. These truths, having been observed and honed in my work with over a thousand families through my clinical practice, and they apply to all families, of all backgrounds, with all sizes and permutations. These nine principles of healthy family functioning, parent-child relationship, and Godly foundation form the teachable moments of effective Christian parenting.

While families can be tossed about on the seas of specific stressors, developmental stages, sibling birth order, and family of origin experiences by both parents, the clinical wisdom of these nine principles can provide context for understanding, and ballast to right the ship and to weather all storms.

I begin this book by providing a lengthy case study. The Bower family is fictional, a patchwork of clinical cases I have treated over the years. The Bowers tell their stories, so that each family member becomes a voice, a perspective, in the healing process. No voice is predominant, more or less important, right or wrong. Each is vital, though, because they are different and unique. And they are family.

The stories become the fabric into which I weave the eight principles, thereby

strengthening the cloth to resist tears and turmoil. In presenting these teachable moments, I link each principle to Scriptural truth. As we seek to find and follow God's will in our lives and in parenting our children, we build confidence, character, and commitment as parents. We provide healthy role models for our children. We accept God's direction and promise to "train your children up in the ways of the Lord, that they will not depart from it when they grow old." (Proverbs 22:6).

Finally, as an addendum, I offer appendices and Learning-the-Concept exercises that I have developed over the years. These handouts are designed to provide structure and reference to implementing the nine principles on an on-going basis in family dynamics.

I pray that God will bless you as you read this book. I pray that you find strength, hope, and foundation for your life-long journey called parenting. I hope I have reinforced all the good things you are already doing as parents and offered you valuable perspective for enhancing the lives and experience of God's most precious gift and responsibility to us --- our children.

Prologue

“Fine,” Jason spit at Emily, as he stomped through his bedroom door. “If you won’t take me to the library to get that book, I’ll just fail English Lit.” He stopped and grabbed hold of the edge of the door, glaring at his sister. “And it will be your fault,” Jason yelled at Emily before slamming his door shut. The door rattled against the frame as the skull and crossbones poster rustled on it. The menacing caution across the face of the poster, get out and stay out, said it all.

“Mom, wait a minute,” Emily said into her cell phone, as she turned away from Jason to get more privacy. “Jason’s going ballistic again.”

“Well, Emily, my meeting at work ran late. I’m just calling to tell you I’ll be another half hour before I get home.”

Emily felt the strain in her mother’s phone call. “Just hurry, Mama,” she pleaded. “I’m trying to get Grace to bed, and Jason’s being his usual royal pain in the you-know-where.”

“Now Emily,” her mother consoled, “We’re all under a lot of stress.” Lauren knew her eighteen year-old daughter well enough to realize that she didn’t call her ‘Mama’ unless she had reached her limit. “I’m coming as fast as I can. Wait, that’s your father.”

Lauren clicked her cell phone over to the other line. “Jim, I’m so glad you called. Emily’s having a crisis with the kids and I’m still a half hour away. Are you on your way home?”

“Hi, sweetheart,” Jim began out of the blue. “My day was fine. Thanks for asking, and how was yours?” His sarcasm dripped from his wife’s cell phone. Lauren had a habit of starting conversations in mid-stride, without the amenities Jim inherited from his Deep South upbringing.

“Jim, cut it out. Our children need us. Where are you?”

The edge in his wife’s tone told Jim this was no time to make his point, again. “I’m pulling onto Sentinel Lane as we speak. Ah, there’s our house up ahead, right where I left it.”

“Hold on,” Lauren clicked over to Emily’s line.

“Sweetheart, your father is just about pulling in our driveway now. You tend to Grace. Daddy will help Jason. Hold on again,” Lauren clicked back to Jim. “Thank God you’re close by. I told Emily to put Grace to bed and that you would help Jason get over his meltdown.”

“General ma’am, yes ma’am, *zeig heil*,” Jim clicked his heels in character, as he turned into the family driveway.

“Jim, stop. I’m not feeling very playful right now. Hold on,” Lauren clicked back to Emily.

“Do you see your dad outside yet?”

“Yeah, Good timing. Grace just cut herself trying to shave her legs ‘like mommy and sissy do.’ I gotta go.”

“Emily, wait. Is she all right?”

“Just a few streaks of blood.”

“Blood? Oh my God.”

“Mom, it’s just blood, like what we get when we don’t shave that carefully either.”

“But Grace is crying. I can hear her behind you. Put her on the phone.”

“Mom, it’s okay. I’ve got it covered. Let me go.”

“Is your father there yet?”

“He’s coming in the door just now.”

“Good. Give him your cell phone and go tend to Gracie’s cuts. I’m sorry I’m not there. Why is all this happening right now?”

“It’s drama central as usual. Welcome to my world, Mom.” Emily handed the phone to her father, sighed, and took Gracie’s little hand in hers to lead her to the bathroom.

Introduction

If this episode in the lives of the Bower family hits home to you in any way, this book and the learning series will help. How many of us live at “chaos central?” How do we restore order to chaos? What roles do faith and the example of Christ play in our finding and maintaining that order?

Lauren and Jim Bower were married nineteen years ago next month, in Lauren’s home town of Colby, Georgia. They were college sweethearts. Each had grown up in the church and professed strong faith. In fact, it was their participation in Campus Crusade for Christ that had sparked the romance. Jim’s quirky sense of humor and gentlemanly consideration had endeared him to Lauren, while her homespun goodness had intrigued Jim. It had all felt right. Unfortunately, the spark of romance fueled a fire of intimacy before its time, and in spite of best intentions. As soon as Lauren confirmed her suspicions, Jim “did the right thing” and they were married. Their subsequent explanation was that Emily had been “premature.” But Emily really knew the truth, even if she had never made an issue of it.

At forty-two, Lauren still maintains her youthful looks. She was a knockout, blond-haired, blue-eyed, size four when Jim fell in love with her their junior year, and she still is today. Over the years, though, Jim has gotten up close and personal with Lauren’s steel blue eyes, emphasis on the steel. She is as stubborn and determined as they come. Jim’s pet name for her is “mini-might.” Obstacles on life’s path are challenges to her. She is the consummate modern woman, dual-tracked with a mid-level computer analyst career and able to maneuver around the professional speed bumps to be at every one of her children’s school or athletic events. She runs a tight ship both at home and at the office. Of late, however, her home ship has sprung too many leaks for her to successfully patch up.

Easy-going Jim, on the other hand, complements his wife's drive with a roll-with-the-punches style that embraces the mantra, life's too short to get caught up in the details. When the kids were younger, he had developed his insurance business with customer presentations, cold calls, and other marketing strategies. As a full-fledged financial planner, he is now content to enjoy the residuals each year and ride the stock market with some of his high roller clients. At six foot, two inches tall, he carries a little more girth than he wants to. He rationalizes that his extra twenty pounds is the price of complacency. His work schedule is his own. He lets Lauren take the lead with church, but he is active. He's aware that he is his children's primary role model. He sees himself as the counter-balance to their mother in his children's lives. Ying and Yang.

Emily has the oldest child thing nailed down. Responsible, self-starter, good student, helpful to others. She's got her daddy's height, at five feet, ten inches tall, but her mother's looks and metabolism. Daddy keeps telling her to eat more, while mama tells her to hush, she's just fine. She's had boyfriends, but nobody serious. She's focused on finishing high school strong academically, so that she has her pick of colleges. She keeps putting off fun for later. She says she can't wait for college "so that I can finally have a life," but deep down inside, she knows she'll miss her family. In some ways, Emily has grown up too quickly, and in other ways, not at all.

Jason's the athlete his father had wanted to be. At six foot, one hundred eighty pounds, he already looks down on his big sister and postures with his dad. Jim and Jason's wrestling matches are family lore. Of late, however, Jim tries harder to win and pretends less when Jason gets the better of him. Jason might be fifteen and a high school freshman, but he acts ten most of the time, at least according to his big sister. Mom and dad, however, occasionally catch him

being responsible and considerate of others. The “Keep Out!!” poster on his bedroom door is more attitude than character. He will needle Gracie and he refuses to accept that Emily’s in charge in the absence of mom and dad. He wants to be left alone, as long as everybody knows it loud and clear. Mom and dad had hoped Jason would be out of the adolescent rebel stage by now, and “get it.” Still feeling his way, though, Jason seems to stay on the fringe between good and evil with friends, choices, and decisions.

Grace and Emily have the “oops” factor in common. Lauren and Jim saw their family as ideal and complete after Jason was born. Then, seven years later, Gracie made a grand entrance, stage left. She even almost died at birth, having the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck not once but twice. She was anoxic. Her heart stopped briefly, and she stayed in NICU for a day as a precautionary measure. At eight years old now, Grace knows how to work the “special blessing” factor in the family. Emily and Jason see her getting away with things that they never did at her age. Mom and dad usually ignore their pleas and chalk it up to normal sibling rivalry. Grace is all girl, except when she gets that little gleam in her eye and tries to run over the soccer defender while driving for the goal.

The Bowers are surviving. They have their joys and triumphs, but also their sorrows and defeats. The children’s personalities are the best and the worst of both of their parents. The developmental pulls on the parents, as well as on the children, yield conflicting goals, leading to more chaos than order in family functioning with Emily preparing to launch, and Grace now coming into her own, Jim and Lauren are keenly aware that time is growing short to make a difference in who their children grow up to become.

Jesus said that He came so that we may “have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). In my over thirty-five years of clinical practice with children, adults, and families, I cite

this verse repeatedly in offering the hope and goal of healing. The Bowers are surviving. Each family member, and the family as a whole, has life. No one, however, has life abundantly. Now is the time for the Bowers to step up and embrace the journey from having life to having life abundantly. It is a journey from surviving to thriving.

Healthy, vibrant families create and nurture character, responsibility, independence, and personal growth for all. Parents have succeeded in their job of parenting when they launch responsible, independent adults into the world. Weaving these teachable moments into the fabric of your family life will strengthen you on your journey from surviving to thriving and help you reach your personal and family goals. A habit is defined as any behavior that persists over time. When you want to develop a good habit, it requires consistent, repetitive effort practiced typically over four to six weeks. When you repeat a desired behavior consistently for four to six weeks, and you suddenly stop the behavior, you will miss it. It has become a new part of you.

Similarly, the journey of life often involves adapting to changing circumstances by changing your behaviors to more accurately and efficiently reach your goals. Doing so requires assessing your comfort zone and choosing to move outside your comfort zone in service to reaching your goals. Thus, we are all consistently challenged to trade in the familiar, which doesn't work as efficiently, for the unfamiliar, which has proven to work more efficiently. This is the task of forming good habits out of bad.

Contained within the text of Teachable Moments are highlighted areas entitled **Learning the Concept**. Therein is either a learning exercise or a reference to an appendix that provides you with opportunities to challenge your comfort zone, practice unfamiliar behaviors, and develop more Christ-centered parenting habits. As with all new learning, developing these tools will seem awkward and unnatural at first. With practice, however, they become second nature.

The nine teachable moments described herein provide a template for making this journey. If you and your family are surviving, but you want more, I invite you to make this journey with me.

These truths about children and teens are gleaned from my work with patients in my clinical practice. They are:

1. Communication is relationship.
2. Clearly define who's in charge.
3. Children will always test the limits.
4. Children never mean what they say.
5. A family is not a democracy.
6. Hormones will wreak havoc.
7. Teenagers will rebel.
8. Problems Can Be Solved
9. Effective parents exercise the principle of responsible freedom.

Join me on this journey. Choose thriving and abundance.

CHAPTER ONE

COMMUNICATION IS RELATIONSHIP

It's true in all relationships, but especially among family members. How we communicate with each other defines our relationships. Communication is the first indicator of building a relationship. The style and depth of communication tells you the level of emotional intensity and bonding being developed. Both nonverbal and verbal communication are equal partners in building healthy relationships. Conflict puts relationship under duress, and effective communication is the balm that soothes relational conflict. Active listening, the primary communication tool of healthy relationships, paves the royal road to Christ-centered parenting. As we embark on this journey of learning how to grow kids and teens God's way, an immutable truth and the first pillar of parenting is this: Communication is relationship.

OUR FULLY HUMAN EXAMPLE

The Christian faith accepts Jesus Christ as both fully divine and fully human. He, as God, is the *alpha and omega*. He has been from the beginning and will be with us into eternity. He, as human, provides us with an example of perfection. As we read about Jesus, the man and ministry in the Bible, we can see examples of all that is right and good with God's creation.

As Jesus chose and taught his disciples, He gave us an example of effective parenting. He laughed and played with them at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-12). He taught them patience, tolerance, and the joy of children (Mark 10:13-16). He taught in parables, which gave his disciples opportunity to wrestle with the lessons, think for themselves, and incorporate the teachings into their daily living. When the disciples didn't get it, Jesus explained his teachings.

He dealt with sibling rivalry and was longsuffering with their shortcomings and foibles (Matt 18:1-3). When his children strayed, Jesus rebuked but did not reject (Luke 10:38-42). He even got angry. His anger, however, came in the form of righteous indignation (Matt 21:13). He held evil accountable, actions speak louder than words, but reserved judgment (Matt 12:33-37).

Jesus is our example for Christ-centered parenting and effective communication. His words conveyed his heart. His words and actions matched. He sought teachable moments with his children and spent his life building a legacy, an example for us to follow.

BUILDING BLOCKS OF RELATIONSHIP

Communication is the first building block of relationship. I just welcomed my second grandchild into our family. We were there when our daughter gave birth. Holding a newborn in your arms is a daunting task. She is fragile. She is weak. She is dependent. She is launched into a hostile and threatening environment when birth brings her from the womb to the world. I am a part of a loving network, along with her parents and other extended family, who are charged with keeping her safe and protected, while helping her grow.

Before her birth, she listened to her mother's heartbeat. She heard her mother breathing. Now, she has suckled from her mother's breast and looked deeply into her mother's eyes. Her grip around my one little finger is sure and strong. We are communicating to her by voice, by touch, by warmth, by comfort. She is communicating to us by sight and by her cries. She has "I'm poopy" cries, "I'm hungry" cries, "I'm tired" cries, and "I hurt" cries. She also coos when she is content, and she is beginning to visually track us in her surroundings. We are communicating to each other. We are building relationship.

The style and depth of communication is indicative of a developing emotional intensity and bonding experience. A famous research study and its follow-up in mother-child bonding (Harlow, 1958; Jeddi, 1970) let a rhesus monkey spend time with either a cloth covered monkey mannequin or a wire-meshed monkey mannequin. The young monkey instinctively and repeatedly chose to spend time with the cloth covered mannequin. This seminal work defined the concept of “contact comfort” in bonding and building parent-child relationships.

Even though Skype computer technology gives children opportunity to see and talk to their parent via computer link when the parent is off to war or away on extended business trips, such long distance relationship never takes the place of being there for your child as much as you can. Proximity increases the depth of communication.

The intent and content of communication defines your style in building healthy relationships with your child and family. Emotional intensity and bonding experiences are developed as you vary time and opportunity to be with your child. In addition to Directional Communication, that helps our children be safe, and Instructional Communication, that helps them learn and grow, parents more often overlook opportunities to have Check-In Time with their children. Finally, as a Christ-centered parent, you want to be ever vigilant to spot Teachable Moments when interacting with your child.

SATURDAY MORNING AT THE BOWERS

After handling the crises of Friday evening, with Emily helping her sister, Grace, clean up from her cuts and go to bed, while Jim collared his son, Jason, to help him settle down and get his schoolwork needs met, the Bowers all went to bed and then woke up Saturday morning. This was usually their most leisurely morning of the week and they had made a habit of having a

family breakfast. It was one of the few mornings in the week the kids could enjoy their dad's famous "the works" omelet or their mom's scratch pancakes smothered in syrup. Some got up early, others later, but all made a point to be at the table for a 10 AM breakfast with hungry appetites in hand. Jim and Lauren sat by the ends of the breakfast table after serving the family. Emily sat to her dad's left and beside Grace, while Jason slouched in his chair opposite his sisters.

"Mm mm, Mama, these pancakes... are... delicious." Emily raved between mouthfuls.

"Hey, no fair," Grace chimed in. "I want some too. Pass those babies this way," she directed her father. She reached toward her dad to snag a pancake off the serving plate.

"Now Grace. Settle down," her dad cautioned. "You'll get your pancakes when it's your turn." He turned to his son and continued, "Jason, pick your pleasure. Pancakes or omelet for you this morning?"

Jason grumbled and began to uncoil from his slouch. His mom wanted to correct her son's table manners, but decided to hold off for now.

"What's this stuff in the omelet?" Jason grouched.

"That's peppers. Pieces of red peppers and green peppers, you know, to give the omelet a festive look and to perk up the flavor."

"Yuck." Jason glided back into his slouch.

"Okay, then," his dad continued undaunted, "pick the pancakes this morning." He started to slide the spatula under two pancakes on the serving platter and transfer them to his son's plate.

"Dad, why do you have to be so upbeat? It's still the middle of the night."

Jason's mom chimed in, "Don't be such a grump, Son." His dad finished transferring the pancakes and smiled, without comment.

“Grump. Grump. Grumpy grump.” Grace sing-songed across the table. “My turn for pancakes, Pop.” Jim turned to serve Grace.

“Grump this, you twerp,” Jason barked at his little sister. “I was up until 3 AM last night trying to get to the top level on my computer game, but I kept getting outsmarted by the enemy. So leave me alone.”

“Yeah.” Jim noted, sneaking in a teachable moment, “The enemy will outsmart us at every turn if we let him. We can’t take him on alone.”

“What are you talking about?” Jason blurted out of his fog.

“3 AM, huh? His mom added, “and yet you knew that breakfast would be at 10 AM regardless. Hmmm.” She paused for effect and concluded, “no wonder you’re tired, but, you know, Jason, that still doesn’t give you the right to bark at your sister.”

“Yeah.” Grace added, and then stuck her tongue out.

“I think you owe Grace an apology, Son,” Lauren directed before cutting her eyes at Grace.

“Sorry.” Jason spit through gritted teeth.

“And, Grace,” Lauren continued, turning toward her younger daughter, “I think you owe your brother an apology for teasing and baiting him.”

Grace looked dumbstruck. She sputtered, “but...but...”

“Grace...?” Jim concurred with his wife.

“Okay, fine. Sorry, Jason,” she offered an unfelt apology.

The Bower family ate in stunted silence for a while before Jim changed direction. “Well, that was fun.” Nobody laughed or even looked up. “So, let’s talk about plans for the day.”

Each family member spoke in turn about their expectations for the day. Jim and Lauren encouraged the discussion and asked questions about how their plans could be accommodated and coordinated. Each then carried their dishes to the sink, rinsed them, and put them in the dishwasher. The morning was off and running.

DIRECTIONAL, INSTRUCTIONAL, CHECK-IN, AND TEACHABLE MOMENTS

This little slice of the Bowers' Saturday morning is offered to illustrate several points. First, family communication is never easy or smooth. Family moments of moods, attitudes, and expectations all aligning in perfect synchrony are rare. They are the picture of "life doesn't get any better than this." This vignette is more the norm than the exception. Second, the depth and variation of communication in relationship is constantly changing. As parents, we are to be aware of those constant changes, adapt accordingly, and hold on for dear life. The four levels of communication in families can be present in ever-changing fashion. As parents, we are to take advantage of opportunities to direct, instruct, check in, and teach each and all of our children.

Offering direction to our children comes most easily to us. Of course we want them to be safe. The younger they are, the more direction they require. When Jim told Grace to "settle down, you'll get your pancakes when it's your turn," he was both directing and instructing. The meaning within his words reinforced that families take turns and are patient. Direction and instruction are the most conflict-free components of healthy family communication.

When Jim explained to Jason what those "red and green things" were in the omelet, he offered instruction. Instruction is a natural use of the parent as the resident expert on matters. Young children hunger for instruction and will often come to the parent for help. Teens, on the other hand, are not as easy to instruct. When you bump up against attitude from your teen (or

youngster for that matter), ask permission before you instruct. For example, a mom might see her young teen struggling with make-up and ask, “You know, I’m a regular make-up whiz. Can I offer some pointers?” If your child declines your help, respect her wishes and add, “maybe later,” or, “Well, if I can ever be of help, let me know, okay?” In this way, you are leaving the door open for her to come to you later.

Check-in communication gives you opportunity to keep current in your child’s life. The Bowers’ Saturday morning breakfast ritual provides them with a context within which to check in with each child. After the meal is ideal, in that, hopefully, the children are sated, comfortable, and more likely to comply. Check-ins are questions designed to find out “what’s up” with your child. In addition to daily events and expectations, questions like, “How’s that lit project coming?” and, “Do you have the clothes you need for tomorrow?” are check-in moments.

In addition to finding out plans for upcoming events, check-ins also include what I call the “How was your day, dear?” time. In essence, this is a debriefing on events of the day. You can follow up on morning expectations, as well as give your child opportunity to talk about anything that is on his mind related to how his day went. Check-ins keep all relationships current and vital. Healthy marriages make a habit of checking in with each other frequently as well.

When my son was a teenager, we would banter over check-ins. Often, it would go like this:

“Hey, son. What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

“How was school today?”

“Fine.”

“What did you learn about today?”

“Stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“You know, stuff stuff.”

“Was it mostly yellow stuff, or oblique stuff?”

“Okay, Dad, now you’re weird.”

Although sometimes that was the extent of our conversation, I tried and he responded.

We connected. The hidden message in check-ins is that we care.

Teachable moments are the lifeblood of effective parenting. Christ-centered parents are always on the lookout for them. We even sneak them into the conversation, as Jim did when he commented on Jason’s difficulty getting past the bad guys on his computer game to succeed to the next level. More often, though, teachable moments are crafted from our experiences. They, too, are usually better received by asking permission before launching into your mini-lesson.

If Emily were to come home from a bad date and her mom caught her before she tumbled into bed, she might bend her mom’s ear for a while about her date. Lauren could seize the teachable moment with a summary comment like, “Sweetheart, I’m so sorry you suffered through this date with a jerk. It sounds like a wasted evening. Some guys just don’t get it and stay in jerk mode. Thankfully, all guys are not jerks. Hang in there. God has Mr. Right for you somewhere out there.”

Such teachable moments are outside of the classroom, have no reading assignments and no discernible exam. They happen in life, in real time, and they have immediate and lasting impact. The outcome is less important than the process. You may not be able to relate to what your child is experiencing and you may not have the right answer for her. You are, however, there for her. Your efforts to help provide the emotional bonding of the teachable moment.

LEARNING THE CONCEPT: Exercise 1, Types of Communication

Four types of basic communication apply in parent-child relationships. When you are telling your child what to do, you are using **Directional Communication (DC)**. When you are giving your child information that will help broaden their knowledge base and help them learn, you are using **Instructional Communication (IC)**. When you want to connect with them in the moment, you are defining **Check-In Time (CI)**. When you have your child's full attention to give him some of your wisdom with the intent and context in which to use it, you have defined a **Teachable Moment (TM)**.

Beside each of the items listed below, mark DC, if the item is an example of Direct Communication. Mark IC if the item is an example of Instructional Communication. If the item conveys an opportunity for you to Check-In with your child, mark it CI. If you see the beginnings of a Teachable Moment with your child, mark TM.

_____ 1. Be careful, Sweetheart. Don't go too close to the water. It's way over your head.

_____ 2. Dude, what's up?

_____ 3. Okay, now, put the worm on your hook like this, so it won't wiggle off.

_____ 4. Boy, when I was your age, my dad used to tear up my butt for the least little thing.

Now, I don't do that with you. Do you want to know why?

_____ 5. Rise and shine, big guy. We've got work to do.

_____ 6. Here, Sugar. Let me help you tie that shoe.

_____ 7. Hey, Darlin'. How was your day?

_____ 8. What makes you think you're ready to learn how to drive?

_____ 9. You know, sharing works really good. First, when you share, you make a friend. Also, sharing helps you enjoy giving, instead of just getting all the time.

- _____10. When you want to make a good choice, write down all the pros and cons, and then go with the longer list.
- _____11. Hello. Earth to Tommy. Put up your Gameboy and come to the table to eat.
- _____12. Are you okay in there?
- _____13. Put your shoulder down and drive your defender. The lower lineman wins the battle.
- _____14. So, which homework subject do you think you'd like to tackle first?
- _____15. Who wants to help me make cookies?
- _____16. Hey, Punkin. Rough day at preK?
- _____17. So, what makes a good boyfriend these days?
- _____18. You know, what helps me stay on track is keeping "to do" lists.
- _____19. Now, why do you think I would tell you, first cut the grass, then get paid?
- _____20. Use your magic words, please.

VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Verbal communication in relationship building gets all the press. Nonverbal communication is often seen merely as the backdrop for verbal communication. However, each is vital and instrumental in creating emotionally healthy relationships. With children and teens especially, facial expressions, posture, gait, breath, and gaze all convey meaningful nonverbal communication. If you only zoom in on his words, you will miss vital information to help decode what your son is trying to say.

Nonverbal communication also is a portal into deeper feeling. Later in this book I will explain why children never mean what they say. As parents, it's up to us to decode their words. Tuning into their nonverbal language gives us the tools we need to decode. Perceptive parents

will find themselves noticing disparity between your child's words and actions. "I hear what you are saying, but your actions don't match your words. What else is going on?" A shuffling gait can mean "I don't want to go." An eye roll or shoulder shrug can mean "Leave me alone." A vacant gaze can mean "All I hear right now is blah, blah, blah. I'm not getting it, or I don't want to."

As parents, we have our own arsenal of nonverbal communication as well. When I was growing up, I remember my dad as kind, gentle, and ever patient with me. However, when I crossed the line, he never said a word. He never got mad at me. He gave me "THE LOOK." His look of disappointment melted away all of my resolve to take him on. I quickly conformed to his expectations.

I often tell parents that kids are the emotional barometer of what's going on in the family. They know what we are feeling long before we know. Children will take parent nonverbal cues and respond accordingly. As both children and parents develop awareness of and congruity between both our nonverbal and verbal communication, emotionally healthy family relationships bloom.

LEARNING THE CONCEPT: Exercise 2, Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication, What Does It Mean?

The tuning in and decoding process of communication often sets the tone for how effectively we communicate with our children. Helping our children avoid mixed messages and clarifying their intent and meaning increases the emotional intensity and bonding of our relationships.

Below are verbal and nonverbal descriptors in the left hand column and possible meanings in the right hand column. Match the columns by putting the letter of the decoded

meaning in the space beside the number of the descriptor. After matching the meaning to the descriptor, mark whether the match is **Verbal (V)**, **Nonverbal (NV)**, or **Both (B)** and whether the message is **Clear (C)** or **Mixed (M)**.

- | | |
|--|--|
| _____ 1. Come here this very minute, young man | A. I heard your question, and I know I should but I don't really want to listen right now. |
| _____ 2. Blank stare from your child after you ask her a question. | B. Disappointed and/or angry. I will get to the bottom of this. |
| _____ 3. Sitting on the ground, holding her knee, and sniffing softly. | C. I know I should want you to go, but I don't. |
| _____ 4. Long, lingering, tight hug. | D. Loving the attention, even if it's negative and/or mad. |
| _____ 5. OK Dad, in a minute. | E. I don't know what the right thing is to say. I am scared and/or mad. |
| _____ 6. The Look! | F. I'm loving it. |
| _____ 7. Daughter busting a move while listening to her iPod. | G. I'm serious and need your input. |
| _____ 8. Sure, Son. What's on your mind? (while reading the newspaper.) | H. Finally. Exuberance. Victory. |
| _____ 9. Have a good time (said with a shaky voice and through gritted teeth). | I. I didn't hear you and don't want to hear you. |
| _____ 10. Son, we need to talk. Come sit with me (patting the couch cushion beside you). | J. I'm angry and/or disappointed. You didn't just do that. |
| _____ 11. I don't like peas. Clenched teeth, tight-lipped. | K. Look at how different and unique I am. |
| _____ 12. Joey's teasing me and won't leave me alone (said running and giggling). | L. I'm in control and digging in my heels, |
| _____ 13. Staring at TV and no response to a direction or question. | M. If I put you off, maybe you'll forget or do it yourself. |
| _____ 14. Checkmate! Hah! (Hands thrust over | N. I love you so much. |

- his head.)
- _____ 15. Outlandish, multi-colored jeans, bling and piercings, T-shirt stating, “don’t look at me.” O. I’m trying to be brave, but it hurts.
- _____ 16. Arms crossed over chest, scowling, chair turned completely around. P. I don’t want to stop playing.
- _____ 17. (Running past you in tears) I’m never going to school ever again! Q. I did what you wanted.
- _____ 18. I said I’m sorry. Now leave me alone. R. I won’t let you down, even if I want to.
- _____ 19. If you can’t get anybody else, I’ll help. S. I may have to be here, but I’m not talking.
- _____ 20. (Legs crossed, bouncing on tip toes) No, Mama, I don’t have to pee. T. I’m soooo embarrassed.

WHEN CONFLICT ERUPTS --- ACTIVE LISTENING

Consider normal, healthy family communication to be similar to your child having no fever. His emotional temperature is 98.6 degrees. There’s laughter, give and take, and cooperation. Chores are getting finished without hassle. Kids are playing nicely together. There’s banter, questions, answers, direction, check-ins, and teachable moments.

Now, consider when your child has a problem. If it were a cold or the flu, his temperature would go up. He would be sniffly, sneazy, with aches and pains, nausea, maybe vomiting. His body is trying to deal with and ward off infection. His symptoms are the body’s way of doing this. The higher the fever, the more infection and illness you have to treat. He needs medicine and time to heal.

When your child is in emotional or relational conflict, his words and actions tell you just how high his emotional fever is climbing. He needs soothing words of understanding, empathy, to help bring his emotional fever down. Just as you keep alert for physical symptoms of illness,

so too do you need to put your radar up to catch the words and actions of your child that define emotional distress and relational conflict.

Active listening paves the royal road to relationship in Christ-centered families. Active listening leads to your child feeling heard, feeling your empathy for his conflict. It is the primary communication tool to calm conflict in the family. It precedes substantive, positive change in family interactions. It soothes the savage beasts of defiance, rage, and disrespect. With timely application, it minimizes outbursts and precedes helping children redirect their energies in more productive ways.

Fundamentally, active listening is your effort to stay tuned into your child's feelings in a timely fashion. Its basic format is simple, "You feel..." The variations on this format are abundant. Additionally, the communication tools of passive listening, parroting, paraphrasing, and noncommittal response (See Appendix 1) are variations on the theme of tuning into your child's feelings. The more creative you are in active listening, the more likely you are to get and keep your child's attention. He will only cooperate freely in addressing his concerns after he feels heard and understood. Active listening affords your child the best and fastest means of feeling heard and understood.

As Appendix 1 describes, active listening requires your full and total attention on your child's perspective of his conflict. You may disagree with his behavior, You may not remotely imagine how he could feel the way he does. You may have the perfect solution to his problem. None of that matters until and unless he feels heard and understood. When your child is in conflict, your active listening what he has to say is your best way to reduce his "fever," that is, to lower the intensity of what he is feeling.

THE WAY THE COOKIE CRUMBLES

Grace saw Jason come out of the kitchen one night with several chocolate chip cookies from the porcelain kitty cat cookie jar that sat atop the kitchen counter. He went into the den and flopped down on the Laz-e-Boy recliner to watch his TV shows. Those cookies looked really good to her, and so she bounced off the couch and trotted into the kitchen to get a handful for herself. Lauren heard her daughter stomp out of the kitchen moments later and into the den. Jason was dead meat.

“Why do you have to always be such a big jerk? You could have left some cookies for somebody else, you know.” She stood next to her big brother by the side of the recliner. Jason barely even looked up at Gracie.

“You snooze, you lose, you little bug,” Jason blinked and turned back to watching his show. “You should have gotten there before me if you wanted some cookies,” he added. “Mmm, they are really good.”

Gracie stomped her feet and reached out to grab a cookie out of Jason’s hand. As she had heard the voices of her children get louder and more heated, Lauren got up from her desk in the kitchen alcove and hustled into the den. She got between her flailing children and pulled Grace back.

“Lemme go,” Gracie fumed, “I’m gonna make Jason pay for being such a jerk.”

Lauren picked up her little girl, Gracie’s arms and legs still flailing, and hauled her out of the den. She took her to the living room and sat her down on the couch. Lauren sat down beside her daughter, who was about to melt into tears. She pulled Gracie to her and hugged her tightly.

“Oh, Baby, I’m so sorry. You really wanted some of those cookies, didn’t you?”

“He’s always doing this kind of stuff. You know the world is not only about Jason and what he wants,” Gracie protested.

“He was being selfish. He hurt your feelings.”

“Yeah,” Gracie forced out the word between sobs. “It’s not fair.”

“No, Sweetie, it’s not. You didn’t get to the cookies first. You are the youngest and smallest in the family. And if you had gotten to the cookies, you would have left a few for others or even offered some to Jason, knowing how much he likes chocolate chip cookies, like you do.”

“I’m never giving him another cookie. Never ever.”

“You want your brother to hurt like you do right now, huh? You feel hurt and powerless. Those are crumbly feelings, aren’t they?”

After more discussion between them, Gracie’s tears dried up and she and her mom made a date to bake more cookies together tomorrow morning, any kind that Gracie wanted. Lauren made a mental note to confront Jason later about his attitude toward his little sister.

If this little vignette seems too perfect and surreal, that’s because it is. I’m giving you an ideal example, an idea of the power of active listening at its best. How many of us, even the most well intentioned among us parents, would have come to Gracie’s rescue. I would have fought the urge to declare, “Stop it, you two. Jason, in this family we share. How could you so thoughtlessly empty the cookie jar? Grace, settle down. I’ll handle this. Jason, give me all of your remaining cookies and go to your room. You’re grounded for the rest of the night.” After all, as parents we are primarily peacekeepers, aren’t we?

Well, no, peacekeeping is only a minor part of the parent job description. It’s not even necessary if we are really good at relationship building. While my little rant would have saved Gracie, it also would have alienated Jason more than he already was. Gracie would surely have

beamed a smug smile to Jason as he huffed up the stairs. The next skirmish in the sibling wars would have quite naturally been just around the bend.

LEARNING THE CONCEPT: Exercise 3, Feeling Words and Sharing Feelings

Using Appendix 2 as a “cheat sheet,” talk to one another about your feelings. You can use this list of feelings in a variety of ways. Share with each other five feelings you love to have, five feelings you hate to have, five feelings you’ve never had, five feeling words you don’t understand, and so forth. Describe situations or circumstances in which you experienced these feelings. Whoever is listening at the time, be aware of active listening, as this will help draw out the speaker’s feelings.

If there is a core, universal, rapport-building, communication tool, active listening is it. Parents who actively listen to their children are allowed inside the child’s world. They open their child to an understanding of what they are feeling, of which oftentimes the child is unaware. They unlock understanding, emotional intimacy, and a closer relationship.

However, active listening does not come naturally to many parents. Our need to be in power, to maintain control and discipline, to solve problems, and to know-it-all gets in the way of our using active listening effectively. This communication skill takes time and practice to master.

ACTIVE LISTENING DO’S AND DON’T’S

After reviewing Appendices 1, 2, and 3, you will get more comfortable with the words and intent of active listening. However, what you don’t do is equally important to what you do when active listening. First, don’t solve the problem for your child. While potentially effective in the short run and time efficient, your hidden message to your child is this, “You really are so dumb, immature, and incompetent that I need to solve this one for you. Get out of my way.” No

parent would ever willingly, knowingly, say these words to your child in need, but that's the hidden message of taking over the child's problem without permission and solving it for her.

Second, don't judge, criticize, or rebuke your child in need or in conflict. Lauren could have told Gracie, "Honey, you should know better than to expect Jason to save a cookie for you. What were you thinking?" This response shifts your focus from her feelings to her behavior. She gets no benefit from such a response, and she would likely feel shamed.

Third, don't minimize your child's upset, or make it about you. Lauren could have told her daughter, "It's just a cookie, and no big deal. And besides, your uncle Joey made my life miserable when we were growing up. Now look at him. He's nice as he can be. So, it's all good in the end." Such a well-intentioned comment would only have contributed to Gracie feeling small, insecure, and insignificant.

As you active listen, you can actually feel your child's emotional temperature go down. When you think she is calmed down sufficiently, then join her in problem-solving her conflict. Such comments as, "Well, now that you seem calmer, what can you do to avoid this conflict in the future?" If you have suggestions, preface your counsel with getting your child's permission, such as, "Hey, I've got some ideas. Wanna hear them?"

Appendix 1 provides you with a handout that will walk you through the development of active listening skills. This **Listening/Sharing Exercise** can be used by all family members. The more skilled you are at identifying feelings (yours and others), the more freedom you have to effect positive change. **Appendices 2 and 3** go together. Couples are asked at first to use the feelings word list to find three positive feelings from your distant past, before you even met or knew each other. In sharing those feelings and circumstances with your spouse, the spouse is freed to practice active listening with total objectivity.

As the Listening/Sharing Exercise is practiced repeatedly, couples can move toward more contemporary experiences and more inflammatory circumstances. This is harder active listening and requires a taking turns approach, but it is an excellent tool for mature, loving couples to use as a prelude to creative problem-solving.

While the exercise itself is quite structured, with practice you can remove the time constraints and use the active listening skills when anyone in your family comes to you with a problem or concern. Frequently, I ask couples to use this exercise as a lead-in to what I call their “How Was Your Day, Dear” time. This is fifteen minutes or so apart from distractions where you can check in with each other. It would also apply where you want to see how your child’s day was as well.

LEARNING THE CONCEPT: Exercise 4, Active Listening and Its Variations

As a way to “get” your child, there is no better resource than active listening. Along with its variations, your message to your child is clear: I want to understand what you are feeling. I support your abilities to figure out how to feel better. Farthest from active listening is **Passive Listening (PL)**. You are attentive, looking at your child, and listening fully, but not talking at all. Passive Listening is also known as silence. An active way of telling your child that you are listening, but without interrupting or interjecting, is to make a **Non-Committal Response (NCR)**. These comments are words of encouragement for your child to continue to talk (“Go on.”), exclamations (“Really? Wow!”), or merely space fillers (“Uh huh.”). Closer to active listening, for purposes of clarifying what you are hearing, you can **Parrot (PT)** your child’s comments. This is a word-for-word playback, so that he can hear what he just said to you. It leaves no room for misinterpretation or misunderstanding. However, even with heartfelt intent, if done to excess, parroting can become annoying. Closer still is **Paraphrasing (PR)**, where you

are trying to understand the context of your child's comments. This is helpful in providing your child with different perspectives on the topic, but does not help him expand his awareness of his feelings. When you **Active Listen (AL)** your child, you help him expand the feeling possibilities, more broadly incorporating his feelings and context. Your message is, "I hear you. I understand."

For each of the items below, mark to the left of the item either PL, NCR, PT, PR, or AL, based on whether you think the item reflects passive listening, a noncommittal response, parroting, paraphrasing, or active listening.

1. What you said was, you don't get it.
2. So you might be feeling taken advantage of.
3. Oh no!
4. You want me to drive you to your friend's house.
5. I'm sorry, baby. That looks like it really hurts.
6. Uh huh.
7. What else happened?
8. You're stuck.
9. I understand you don't want to come in for dinner, however, it's dinner time.
10. Hmm
11. It must feel so surreal to you right now.
12. So, I guess you think people don't play by the rules much, huh.
13. You don't have any money.
14. I wonder if what you are saying is only part of the story.
15. You're stuck?

16. What a mess.
17. You mean you have nothing to wear.
18. It's so sad when a boy breaks up with you.
19. You're spitting nails mad and you don't know what to do with it.
20. Leaning forward slightly in your chair, looking intently at her.
21. Stopping what you are doing to give him your undivided attention.
22. You're not sure where you want to go with this decision.
23. You need more time?
24. Oh, brother. For real? Tell me more.
25. So, you know what to do, but not how to do it.

SUMMARY

We communicate in our families from the moment of conception. Life is communicating. Communication is relationship. Whether it is nonverbal or verbal, whether it involves directing, instructing, checking in, or finding teachable moments, you will have healthier relationships in your family with the more effort you put into effective communication with each and every family member.

Jesus Christ provides us the example of effective communication. He embraced all of his feelings and shared those feelings with his flock. Christ-centered parenting starts with taking Jesus' lead.

All families will have conflict. Active listening is the communication tool that best addresses conflict. Active listening focuses on the relationship and the process rather than on the outcome. It empowers children to address and effectively deal with their conflicts. As we practice active listening within our families, we nurture our children to grow in God's way.