

Meeting the Emotional Needs of Our Family

Sally stuffs her hands deeper into her sweater pockets as she kicks a stone ahead of her on the way to the mail box... "Why?" she says to herself, "Why can't Dad show an interest in my life—I need someone to talk to! This youth social life is a nightmare...He does so much stuff with the boys, but me...when I want to talk it seems like his lights don't come on."

Emotion is a by-product of life. Things happen that invite anger. Things happen that make us glad. Things happen that make us sad. We sing with emotion. We choose songs to match our emotion of the moment. Sometimes we wipe tears and sometimes we tap our toes to the rhythm. We are by nature emotional people that need a vent for what is happening inside of us.

As parents we are busy people; we tend to focus on certain aspects of family life. As fathers we may tend to believe mother can be there for Sally. We will take Johnny along with us to the hardware store and believe that we are doing our job. Mothers can be inclined to let the exasperation of relating to a male that would seemingly rather grunt and mumble than speak plain English, to a dad who seems to understand that language better than she does.

As parents, we are missing a very basic building block in the foundation of our children's lives if we do not encourage cross gender emotional interchange. Girls need a dad that is there for them, and boys need a mother that can weave dialogue into their life in spite of all their seeming preference to be upside down on a jungle gym as opposed to talking real life stuff.

In early parenting we start out with little people's problems, but eventually they turn into big people's problems. We are setting the stage for emotional bonding when we have time to commiserate with our two-year old over a doll that fell into a mud puddle and out of her good graces. Someday it may be a young man that was tightly wrapped around her heart and the next moment slipped out of her grasp. A home where it is safe to share the hurts, fears and insecurities, joys, dreams, and goals of life is not

something that just happens without effort. There are steps we can take to invite sharing and there are things we can do that will prevent sharing.

While our family's feet are under our table, we are on a mission to give them tools they need to process life and to rightly utilize the resources around them to aid in that processing. Our ultimate goal as parents is to mentor our children into responsible adults who are able to tackle the ups and downs of life and function independently of our coaching, yet totally depend on God's grace and the resources around them.

There are so many things parents like to do when it comes to aiding our children emotionally. We like to focus on finding the right church where the ministry is kind. We seek to find the right school, the right social environments where they will be accepted. We do not like the job of drawing them out from under the porch after a wound from a friend and helping them sort it all out, but that is an integral part of parenting.

We need to use their experiences in life to teach them how to process relational hiccups, how to sort through what they could have done differently to prevent certain actions or reactions, and how to calm a turbulent turn of events. From the moment of great insult from a "snap" from Fido because his tail was pulled too hard, to their prize car demolished by one careless action, our families are looking to us to help them sort through emotion.

Dysfunctional emotional patterns focus on do not trust, do not tell and do not feel. Healthy emotional patterns merge into the true feelings in the happenings of life until it can be possible to trust again and to talk about it with others comfortably and discreetly.

We will hardly ever get to the point we will need to sit on our hands to keep from clapping because we wrecked our car, but hopefully we can get to the point that as we reflect on even our difficult experiences, we find things to be thankful for. "In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (1Th 5:18). It does not say here for all things...but in all things.

Some of us naturally are prone to see the glass half full and some of us half empty even though the water level is the same either way. Our temperament plays a huge role in our perspectives of the developments of life. As parents, we need to work with each child's natural coping skills to attempt to bring balance to the way they process life.

We have methods we use to process life that lead to belief systems if not guided right. The dog who is shot by a gun, believes all guns will hurt him and will hide out in the wood shed when a gun is in hand. What he "perceives" as actual and controls him, is a faulty "belief system". The truth is one gun hurt him but not all guns will; it was just an accident.

We cannot explain to Fido the emotional bondage he is in because of his “beliefs” about all guns, but God has gifted families with the privilege of dialogue and the ability to bring balance to the perceptions that are a result of the hurts of life. Wrong belief systems hold us captive, and tie us up in knots emotionally. We must balance our family’s belief systems with truth.

The child that believes they are “dumb” needs a parent that helps them process such thoughts factually. A mediocre success or even a failure in one area, does not spell total failure. Or the child that believes it will not help to talk to Sammy about how he offended Sammy with what he said yesterday is setting himself up for emotional bondage. One failed attempt to communicate our feelings to someone does not mean the next one might not go better. Past happenings do not guarantee future repeats. This concept keeps families from trying again to restore relationships. It keeps husbands and wives from trying again to communicate on a difficult subject.

What are some foundational principles for healthy emotional well-being?

1. It is not only acceptable but also necessary to express emotion in sanctified ways.

Spirituality is not the absence of feelings, or denying feelings. Teaching our families they are tough if they don’t cry or talk about difficult things is not in harmony with the way God works with us. The book of Psalms and the book of Job are prized books for hurting people to turn to. It is by divine providence that God allowed us to get a glimpse at how He welcomes His children to pour out their emotions while facing hard things. David told God his bones are roaring, his bed is wet with tears. We do our families a favor when we give them time to feel and “own” their difficult experiences in life. Tears are a language that God understands and we can help them express in sanctified ways.

2. There is a time to stop crying and face life.

Joshua was in dismay at the defeat of Ai. God understood and heard his anguish, but directed him to move on from that experience so he could experience victory. Joshua 7:10, “And the LORD said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face?”

We can err in not allowing enough expression of emotion, but we can also err in not bringing emotional expression into boundaries. Different children will need different levels of guidance. Some will tend to brush off and avoid facing reality and miss out on the “healing” of honesty. Others will dwell indefinitely in the honesty of the moment and miss out on getting on with life.

3. Saying how we feel is a window into our heart, not a sin.

We are all on a quest to be understood as we face experiences of life. Our children are no exception. When they taste a food that is pleasant, they show their glee, and when they taste a food that is unpleasant, they wrinkle up their nose. When we see dress

material we like, we stroke it and smile fondly; when we see some that almost makes our eyes go cross-eyed, we either laugh at it or make sure our disdain is understood in some way. It is all emotional expression.

Sometimes in our quest for orderliness and streamlined home life we forget that our children in their negative dialogue are really giving us a valuable window into their heart to mentor their social and emotional development.

I am saddened to hear stories of children physically abused simply because they stated how they felt on a given subject rather than using how they felt as a platform to develop relationship and balance their perspective. I do not think a child needs discipline the first or second time they let us know the red beets "taste yucky." We can use that emotional expression to tell them about foods we do not like but have learned to like. We discipline if they refuse to eat at least a minimal amount even though we know they do not like it. We need to be careful that we do not subtly, in a desire for order and efficiency, teach our children it is wrong to share your feelings.

Someday they may be married to a husband or wife that cannot understand why they do not communicate and do not open up and say how they feel. The truth is that all their childhood life they were taught that if the way I feel is not positive or according to the house rules, it will bring pain to say how I feel. So I will "keep it safe" and not say anything.

There does come a time we learn not to trumpet our negative emotions, because everyone knows how we "feel," and reaffirming the facts brings no additional value to the family dialogue or our emotional journey. Our children need to learn it is acceptable if we say our likes and dislikes, but it is not acceptable to let our likes and dislikes monopolize our life or the lives of others.

4. Emotional stability is best understood in the context of belonging, worthiness, competence, and boundaries.

Every family member needs belonging (knowing they are loved for who they are, not just for how they perform), worthiness (knowing there are things they are contributing to life that are valuable), competence (they can achieve things that appear bigger than themselves), and boundaries (there are things that have a place but need to be done with limits in duration or depth of expression).

We could think of these four entities as a four-legged stool. We take any one leg off the stool and we have the likely potential to "topple" when we step on the stool.

An angry or bitter child could possibly have been raised in a home where the leg of "belonging" was loose. An extreme shame/guilt complex that runs in overdrive may indicate the leg of worthiness was missing, and they never learned their value to others and God. Their parents may have been better critics than cheerleaders. A fearful child may have had the leg of competence shakily attached. They had parents that did not

raise the bar and encourage them to try great things. Instead, they were left to believe they cannot jump it. A child that finds himself constantly outside the realm of acceptable behavior may not have had enough boundaries defined in his childhood, or we could question how much those boundaries were staked with compassion and relationship.

5. Our families need to see a mom and dad that work together in finding balance in emotional expressions.

One of the most basic needs in helping our children emotionally is that father and mother work together with respect to each other's values and temperament rather than oppose each other. There may be times we will feel that our spouse is allowing too much or not doing enough. We need to communicate together and work out an acceptable platform and a similar goal. If one parent lets Johnny whine his nap time disappointment the whole way from the sandbox to the bedroom, and the other disciplines at the first expression of disappointment, we will raise an insecure child that doesn't know what to do with their emotions.

I think one of the reasons God made opposites attract is that opposites fill the missing attributes in home life. One may set too many boundaries, the other may set too few. One may tend to be overly protective, the other tend to press development and advancement into their lap too early. As they work at their differences they can strike a balance that makes for good emotional stability in the next generation. But when they refuse to merge their values, they create a time bomb in the emotional fabric of their family.

6. Passing on emotional stability cannot be done without personal example.

Deuteronomy 6 advises us, "And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart."

We are being watched as parents. And the things we model – by design or by accident – powerfully communicate our convictions about right and wrong and about acceptable and unacceptable behavior in regards to emotional stability.

If Dad can express anger and frustration at the cows, but Johnny cannot beat up on the dog even if he's being disgusting something is wrong. Do not underestimate the power of association our children are capable of making when we discipline them for not being nice to Fido, and the resulting emotion of anger toward us for our expectations of them versus our example. If we wish for our sons and daughters to accept the idea that there are absolute standards of right and wrong in emotional expression, we must let them see that we believe it ourselves in how we conduct our emotions.

~Howard Horst