

From Broken to Beautiful
A Primer on Marriage Counseling
Week 9 – Helping Couples in Parenting Struggles

Introduction:

As Christians, we would default to believing that children are a blessing from the Lord, therefore, how could they become a source of conflict in marriage? The reality is that most couples have argued over parenting related issues. Some couples, however, have more fundamental parenting disagreements that can threaten or even destroy the marital unity between them.

You can imagine a husband complaining, “She coddles and spoils the kids. They get away with everything with her. She never disciplines and I look like the bad guy all the time.” And she says, “He’s hyper-critical and too hard on the kids. They can’t do anything without getting yelled at and punished. He’s like a dictator.”

This isn’t a parenting class. It’s a conflict class. Couples can argue over if to have children, when to have children, to vaccinate or not to vaccinate, which behaviors are acceptable and unacceptable, modes and methods of discipline, who disciplines, education (home schooling, private school, Christian school), extracurricular activities and schedules, what amounts to disrespect and disobedience, and what constitutes “yelling” (which is very subjective)?

Question:

What specific questions would you ask in order to understand the scope and extent of a couple’s parenting-related conflicts?

What was their home of origin like? How did their parents discipline them? What were the rules in their families of origin? How often do you fight about parenting issues? Where do you have these arguments (in private or in front of the kids)? How would they describe their parenting styles? What is their individual views on spanking, time-outs, or the removal of liberty or privileges? Did something happen to change the dynamic in the home (a child with special needs, disabilities, or the loss of a child)?

Negative effects of parental arguments in marriage on children:

- **EMOTIONAL** Distress – children who witness frequent marital conflict are more prone to anxiety, fear, and depression. When a couple fights over parenting issues, the child can blame themselves for the marital distress.
- **BEHAVIORAL** Changes – stress in the home can cause children to act out at school, to withdraw and isolate themselves, or impulse control.
- **ACADEMIC** Struggles – the stress of marital conflict can affect a child’s sleep and study patterns resulting in lower academic performance.
- Future **RELATIONSHIP** Problems – the examples set for them by parents can affect the mate they choose for themselves, how they handle conflict, and how they raise their own children.

Parenting is essentially disciple-making. We are reproducing ourselves in them, for good and for bad. It’s saying the same thing over and over, far longer than we think we should have to.

Helping Couples in Parenting Struggles:

Step One:

Acknowledge that there is a degree of **REDEEMED** tension inherent in parenting. Notice the following texts:

³ Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. ⁴ Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. ⁵ Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate. (Psalm 127:3-5)

Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him. (Proverbs 22:15)

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Romans 8:28-29)

Children are absolutely a blessing from the Lord, but they are bundles of desire and emotion and they'll push your buttons in pursuit of what they want. They require consistent discipline over time, to train them to obey, to be humble, and to serve others rather than demanding to be served. That can be an exhausting effort, but God has promised to redeem that tension, by using to expose and transform our hearts, as parents.

Guiding Principle:

God has promised to use your children to reveal your **HEART** and conform you to the image of Christ.

People often don't think they're selfish until they get married and then someone is, all of the sudden, trying to dictate their life. Likewise, people often don't think they're impatient until they have children, and that child is wanting to tie their own shoes and you have to be out the door. God is trying to show you something about you.

Step Two:

Help counselees understand your parenting style and its pros and cons.

- There is the **UNINVOLVED** parent who provides little emotional support or guidance. This often results in an emotional disconnect between the child and the parent.
- There is the **PERMISSIVE** parent who sets few rules and leans toward indulging their children. They can create a child-centered home. Permissive parents often seek to be their child's friend instead of their parent.
- There is the **AUTHORITARIAN** parent who is often "strict" and viewed as rigid and demanding. They use punishment as their main teaching tool.
- There is the **AUTHORITATIVE** parent who seeks to balance grace and truth, warmth and boundaries. An authoritative parent understands the fact that they are the parent and not the friend. They seek to be nurturing but also have reasonable rules and expectations.

Guiding Principle:

One's parenting style did not originate in a VACUUM. It's important to help them understand the dynamics that shaped their particular style.

Question:

How can driving motives/idols such as control, respect, peace, reputation, success, and love negatively affect one's approach to parenting?

A person driven by respect will often have a short fuse when it comes to disobedience. A person who struggles with control may try to keep their children on a restrictive leash and believe they're doing it for their good. Someone driven by reputation could demand a pristine house where people aren't actually allowed to live in. The idol of success can lead to unrealistic and harsh expectations on the children to be high achievers – perhaps beyond their abilities. The idol of love can lead a parent to compromise in order to not upset the child. Parent is supposed to be self-less.

As parents, we can't blame all of our struggles on our parents, but their example did have a fundamental impact on us. And, like or not, we tend to repeat what we experienced. But at some point, the counselee will have to take ownership of their actions regardless of the examples that were set for them and the experiences they've had.

Step Three:

Help them apply Biblical principles to parenting.

- Help them apply Biblical methods of COMMUNICATION.

That text ought to be familiar to us. It's the Four Rules of Communication (Be Honest, Keep Current, Attack the Problem, Not the Person, and Act, Don't React. Especially important are the concepts of being truthful, identifying problematic behaviors, and seek to understand one another's perspective and goals in parenting.

- Help them identify shared VALUES and GOALS in parenting.
- Insist on RESPECTFUL conversation at every level.
- Seek balanced COMPROMISE whenever possible.
- Don't intervene in a current conflict unless you are INVITED in by the other parent.
- Present a UNIFIED front to the children to avoid being manipulated or pitted against one another.

Guiding Principle:

Parenting is an opportunity to increase marital INTIMACY through communication and understanding.

Remember, God's design in marriage is that the husband and the wife would experience increasing and pervasive intimacy in every area of their shared life together. The parenting relationship is temporary and transitory. The marriage is meant to be till death do we part. Therefore, the best thing a couple can do for their children is to love one another Biblically and well.

So, we want to avoid one parent making significant decisions apart from the other. We want to avoid one parent speaking in a demeaning way about the other to the children and trying to undermine their authority in the eyes of the kids.

Step Four:

Help the parents develop a Godly pattern of discipline and discipleship.

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4)

¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Genesis 2:15-17)

Within this passage we see valuable lessons regarding the establishment of household rules:

- God clearly established His **EXPECTATIONS** for humanity (vs.15).
- He establishes the fences that include His divine **PERMISSIONS** (vs.16).
- He also establishes His divine **PROHIBITIONS** (vs.17).
- He clearly communicates the **CONSEQUENCES** of disobedience (vs.17).

A rule should ideally have some sort of Biblical foundation so that it teaches something. It shouldn't be arbitrary. It should be purposeful. Your rules should be clearly communicated along with the rewards for obedience and the consequences for disobedience. And the key is follow through and consistency.

Guiding Principle:

If rules are consistently enforced, then we turn our children into **GAMBLERS**.

That's why it's important to work together with our spouse and your child to develop the expectations, standards, rewards, and disciplines before the infraction so that you do not respond emotionally to their disobedience.

Question:

How should parenting strategies shift through different stages of life? What would some of your best advice be for parents of toddlers, pre-teens, teenagers, and grown adults?

In the early years of parenting, we often have to act like more of a dictator. The child doesn't know what is best for them and often wouldn't choose it if they did. As they get older, we transition to mentors and coaches. Tedd Tripp's "Shepherding the Heart of a Child" revolutionized how I disciplined Corey when he was younger – walk through the process.

When parenting is done right, it often results in deep loving friendships between parents and adult children. The key is to not overreact to their sin or their confessions. We want them to feel safe to bring us their struggles. We get frustrated when we forget that their failures are mainly a reminder that they still need to be parented (Ephesians 6:4 – present tense).

Homework:

- Behavior Contract
- Read the “Angry Child” Booklet by
- Read the “How Not to Raise an Addict” booklet by Dr. Mark Shaw

Conclusion:

The number one rule in parenting is that it’s not about you. Parenting is a long-term commitment that shifts over time in its execution, but not in its goals. We want to glorify God in our parenting, and we want to help them to do the same as their love for God deepens over time. The father may be the final authority in the home, but parents are to work together in intimate partnership to raise their children to know, love, and serve the Lord all the days of their lives.