

Parenting in this Beautiful Broken World

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Parenting is the MOST difficult job in the world! Hands down, without a doubt, the most challenging, humbling, and yet fulfilling work the Lord could possibly give us. So, parents, I am writing this with you in mind, knowing firsthand what we face parenting our children. In the beginning we started with all the greatest hopes and dreams we held in our hearts for them, to suddenly it feels like it is coming crashing down as they hit those wonderful terrible two's, pre-teen, teen, young adult, and beyond years. We tend to wonder, what has gone so wrong?

I have found in my practice that I am frequently faced with addressing the needs of children with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other difficulties related to traumatic life events. Although what I am presenting here as the key to working with traumatized children, it is also how I believe God intended us to parent all children and will work with most children. So, if you are struggling with your children's behaviors and/or feeling like you are in a downward spiral and out of options in your home, my hope is that you will prayerfully open your heart and mind to see what God may have for you and your family in this. This is what the top research is telling us works with traumatized children, but what God has already told us works in His word.

I often find one of my greatest challenges, is to help parents overcome their own barriers to successfully caring for their children. Parents frequently state, and rightly so, their concerns with their children's behaviors, which are often extreme by the time they come into therapy. Parents will often come in crises mode, hoping for a quick fix for their child's behavior(s). I truly wish there was a quick fix and that I could give it to you and have you on your way. However, the top trauma research shows that healing comes only by consistent, unconditional, non-threatening, and all loving relationships with repetition, repetition, repetition. Children with trauma typically have a history of chronic dysfunctional and hurtful or abusive relationships in their lives, so are therefore only healed in relationship with those closest to them, typically their caregiver. As you can imagine, if the parent is faced with their own trauma histories and/or are under a lot of stress, it is very difficult for them to be this agent in the child's life. This combination of a stressed child, as any trauma causes a child to be under constant stress, and a stressed parent then leads to what Bryan Post, author of *From Fear to Love* and *The Great Behavioral Breakdown*, poses as the Negative Feedback Loop.

3 Principles of the negative neurophysiological feedback loop:

1. When we're in a place of stress, we can't help someone else through their stress. We act out negative behaviors in the midst of someone else's negative behaviors. We can't help them move into the positive if we remain in the negative.
2. When we're in a place of fear, we can't help someone else with their fear.

3. This is very unconscious stuff, and as long as it remains unconscious, we're powerless to change it. You have to shine the light of consciousness upon your own unconscious fear state and admit to yourself, "I feel scared. I feel scared. I feel scared."

Think about this *fear* for a minute. As a parent of five children, ages 12-20, I know all too well that as parents we are scared to death! When faced with stress (child is acting out, misbehaving, getting into trouble, etc.) we tend to REACT in fear, which means that we say or even just think to ourselves: "what are they doing, why are they doing this, they are doing this on purpose, there must be something really wrong with this child, they are going to embarrass me, people will think I am a terrible parent, they are never going to be able to function in society or have friends and ultimately, even that they are possibly going to kill someone, themselves or end up in prison!!!"

So, what can you do? You can begin by *responding* with love instead of *reacting* with fear. Children with a trauma history, are generally highly sensitive or under great stress, are going to be extremely sensitive and typically perceive, internalize, blame and/or easily twist most things into a negative towards themselves when you or they are under stress. Their physiological systems are extremely sensitive to the states of other people. As the adult, if you move into stress or if some of your own unfinished business (trauma) becomes activated, a sensitive child (I would add, most children) will react to you. If you're really stressed out, or even if you just had a difficult day and walk past this child, the child will react to you. They perceive it as if they did something wrong to cause your stress and ultimately could lose your love. This doesn't mean that you can never have a bad day. It simply means that it helps to stay self-aware and that whenever you interact with another person, you bring all your "stuff" to the table. Try to stop yourself and truly think about what you might be communicating, especially negatively, to your child by the following:

- a. What do you communicate when your child walks toward you?
- b. What do you communicate when your child walks away from you?
- c. What do you communicate when your child goes to bed at night?
- d. Or when you go to work?
- e. What are you communicating that doesn't come out of your mouth? What comes out of your mouth is just the tip of the iceberg. What is really being communicated under the surface? (90% of communication is non-verbal)

So-if you sincerely ask yourself "What am I communicating or potentially communicating?" every time you communicate with your child, you will get in touch with something much deeper than what you have been feeling and believing about your child. Although how we feel inside of ourselves is invisible, we release cellular vibrations, which is part of non-verbal communication. So, if we are angry, frustrated and/or fearful inside that is what is communicated to the child and the child then reacts in the same manner. This is called the neurophysiological feedback loop. If we are calm, relaxed and loving feeling on the inside, this is also what we will communicate. If you do not feel this way or seldom feel this way, especially about yourself and/or your child, then you will need to spend some time working on yourself, because you are where this positive loop will need to begin. You and your child are worth the time and energy to invest in this! It is

unreasonable to expect it to begin with your child. Even when your child is being negative and/or it feels as if they are personally attacking you, you must stay CALM and not *react!* I realize that you will not do this perfectly, you will lose it from time to time because stressed children are masters at targeting our own weaknesses and insecurities as parents. If their behavior causes a negative reaction in us, it gives them a sense of control, and if we cannot control our reaction to our children, then they are controlling us! A stressed child feels out of control, so they do this to get a sense of control back. However, controlling us does not teach them how to gain control of themselves. The key to change then is you, the parent! The more constantly and consistently you can remain calm regardless of the insults your child throws your way, the more your child will learn to trust and follow your lead as a calm and safe person. You are their model for behavior and this is the KEY to success in parenting, not just traumatized children, but all children.

Practical example: laughter is a positive neurophysiologic feedback loop-often when one person starts laughing hysterically, others will start laughing too

This is also why people who are positive, energetic, uplifting, or passionate are so contagious and why we're drawn to them in the same way we are repelled by people who are very negative and pessimistic.

****Your child only wants to be loved unconditionally, but constantly fears that you will stop loving them or leave them. This is the constant underlying fear they *subconsciously, and sometimes unconsciously*, carry around. This is not something they can typically tell you or explain to you. ****

Bryan Post states, "If you have a negative feedback loop continuing with a child who is sensitive or has a history of trauma, the most effective way to challenge and confront that child's darkness is through your brightness."

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in Heaven." -Matthew 5:16

Additionally, Post states, "When you can create regulation (calmness) within yourself in the midst of your child's dysregulation (stress, difficult behaviors, etc.), you become the *true essence of a parent-a positive influence on the growth and development of your child*. But if your child sends negative signals to you, and you react by sending negative signals back, both of you will remain trapped in the darkness. In the neurophysiologic feedback loop, counter the negative with the positive, and the negative simply cannot grow. I know very well that it's a difficult thing to do, but it works."

I often hear and have feared this in the past myself, that as parents we cannot be our child's friend and parent, because they will not respect us as a friend. There is a balance I have found, that a true friendship and appropriate relationship is formed on love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. Isn't this what respect is all about, exemplifying a relationship with the fruits of the Spirit? In true relationship, we learn to trust and respect the other person through these fruits. SO, parents, don't fear being your child's friend in this way, the way God intended! You can love unconditionally and listen without judgement or fear for your child as their friend when you live by the fruits of the Spirit and believe that ultimately they are God's child

first and foremost. He loves them even more than we could ever imagine. If we trust Him first and believe God for our child's guidance and future (sometimes through us as parents, but also sometimes via natural consequences) we will be much better off.

Focus on doing what builds and strengthens relationships, not what will subtract or harm the relationship and you will see the fruits and greatest benefits for you and your child!

My husband and I have made our fair share of mistakes in parenting our own children in a broken world. WE, and our children, are broken and afraid. We have experienced extreme behaviors in our children and in ourselves that we thought could have surely ended our family in disaster, but by admitting our fears and failures and trying something different, we can honestly say we are in a place that feels freer and more at peace with our children today. However, had we not admitted and faced our fears and failures as parents and humans, and continue to do so-daily, if not hourly, our home environment and relationships could look very differently now. This is not to say we don't have struggles or that we won't face future struggles, but we have peace that with the God and the right tools we will be ok-we will make it somehow!

God Bless you and your family in this beautiful broken world-

"...he will give a crown of beauty for ashes, a joyous blessing instead of mourning, festive praise instead of despair." Isaiah 61:3

The following books include more information on how to parent with love vs fear:

From Fear to Love by Bryan Post

The Great Behavior Breakdown by Bryan Post

Beyond Consequences, Logic and Control (Volume 1 & 2) by Heather T. Forbes and Bryan Post

And if you really like to read the more technical stuff, try:

The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma by Bessel Van der Kolk, MD