

Psychotherapy Newsletter

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Telling a Good Story

Did you know as a parent that the basic formation of your child's sense of self stems from what they see reflected in your eyes? You are the holder of their goodness. From the moment of birth, your child looks to you to form their opinion of themselves. They are born with a unique sense of personality, but how they view themselves and come to formulate the aspects of their personality come primarily from you. What a responsibility...

As a therapist working with families, I am learning to get a sense of the hopefulness or challenge in working with a family by how they describe their child. Can a parent easily

represent their child's strengths as they discuss the current struggles? Sometimes there is a strong need to defend against the shame of their sense of failure: "My other child is doing well." "Two out of three isn't bad." "They inherited their grandfather's genes." "I parented both my children the same." Sometimes parents makes it very clear which is the "good" child and which is the "bad." I am learning from my own parenting experience and from working with others, that ironically, it is the child that presents the biggest challenge that also produces the most important changes in you. The compliant, easy-going child (and hopefully you have at least one of these in your household), can provide you with a nice feeling of accomplishment, but it is the child that challenges your comfort zone that pushes you toward growth and helps you fill out as a person.

I have been taught myself as a parent, and now pass this along to others that the choice of words or metaphors that you choose to describe your child are very important. Any trait your child possesses can be represented in its positive form or its negative form. A strong willed child can be seen and described as "determined, driven, focused," or "stubborn, oppositional, defiant." A child with attention problems can be held in high esteem as "creative, thinking outside the box, focusing on those things that catch their attention," or "lazy, stupid, a failure." Since our children look to us for their cues about themselves, you can be sure that they are tuned into the choice of words we use to describe them. And our choice of words and attitude toward them is critical in how they see themselves and what they take with them as they negotiate their way in the world. I tell parents of children with learning problems, that if they can help keep their child's self-esteem intact during their school



years, then when the child is finally free of that environment (where they can feel like a round peg in a square hole), they can later find their niche and become an accomplished adult (and hire an organized office manager!)

We know that how a child feels about themselves has everything to do with whether they find drugs and alcohol as teenagers. Do I feel good about myself and free to enjoy the wholesome, fun-filled activities of life? Or am I preoccupied with a nagging pain deep within me that only goes away (temporarily) when I am medicated with a substance?

As a parent, we must be aware of the times when the story we tell about our child takes a negative turn. It is up to us to deal with the issues within us that stand in the way of finding a positive way to view our child. Are we struggling to stamp out parts of ourselves we do not accept that we see in them? Do we see traits of an estranged family member in our child that we dislike and struggle with? Are they different than we are and we think the only acceptable way to be is how I am? Am I struggling with my own self doubts and problems in life and just don't have the ability to reflect a positive image back to them? Is my expectation of being a parent that my child will be loving toward me at all times? Fulfill me? Gratify me? Be thankful for what I do? Have a sense of pride of ownership over our house and possessions like I do as an adult? Be responsible at every developmental stage? Be a good reflection of me as a parent?

Sometimes the stories I hear about children start even before they were

born. "I had a difficult pregnancy, he was a colicky baby, he's always been hyper and into everything, never did well in school, always in trouble." What chance does this child have to feel good about himself?

There are times, of course, when our children act out and a discussion must occur to deal with the issues. At these times it is also very important to hold their strengths close by and to quickly restore, repair, and bounce back and help the child see themselves in a positive light again. The last thing we want is for a child to become paralyzed or stagnated in a place of feeling badly about themselves.

A child who is already struggling continues to feel very alone with their struggle if the family has taken the stance that the problems are the child's and the work to get better involves only the child. As tempting as it is to put the problems off on the child rather than deal with the potential feeling of failure as parents, when we "have tried so hard," it is critical that the issues be seen as a family problem and that the problem is an indication that the family needs healing. For families that submit to this important process, the expansion that occurs for all family members is ultimately deeply rewarding and the chance that these children will grow up to raise healthy families of their own is tremendously enhanced.

Designing and maintaining a good story is critical, and definitely something to tell over and over to

whomever the child can overhear you speaking with. We all want to feel we are being represented in a positive light by the people who love us. It goes a long way for a child to overhear a parent tell a grandparent something special the child has done, or, in general, being referred to in a high regard. Asking a child for their unique opinion and input on subject matters is very building for a child's sense of self. Taking their ideas seriously and incorporating them in how you function as a family is important. We all thrive as human beings when we are valued, honored, taken seriously, carefully listened to, and our ideas implemented.

If you have lost your ability (perhaps only temporarily) to tell a good story about your child, the aide of a therapist might be helpful. Getting the support and feedback necessary to clear the waters within yourself may be important before the ability to represent your child in a good light can come forward.

Though we are all uniquely, creatively, and wondrously made, we will not be able to know that about ourselves, hold it as part of who we are as our God given sense of worth, unless we first see it reflected by those that have the responsibility to nurture it within us. Remember, we are all fulfilling a prophesy, why not have it be a positive one? A life worth living? A story worth telling?

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