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Negative Feelings and Redemptive Love

"I will set off and go to my father and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned, against God and against you; I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your paid servants.' So he set out for his father's house. But while he was still a long way off his father saw him, and his heart went out to him. He ran to meet him, flung his arms around him, and kissed him. The son said, 'Father, I have sinned, against God and against you; I am no longer fit to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! fetch a robe, my best one, and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us have a feast to celebrate the day. For this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found' And the festivities began."

Luke 15:18-24 (NEB)

In many of the situations in which we have to limit our children's behavior, their feelings are running very strong. While we do have to set limits about behavior, we should not try to limit or dictate children's feelings.

Many parents today were taught that some feelings, such as anger, frustration, or jealousy were "not nice" or wrong. But feelings are not good or bad, they just are. Some feelings are positive and some are negative, but all feelings exist for a reason. Accepting and understanding feelings help us to deal with them.

It is easy to see the relationship between helping children deal with negative feelings and our Christian faith. God accepts us and loves us no matter what we do. All of us do wrongs sometimes and have to experience the consequences of our acts.

I John 1:9 reminds us . . . "If we confess our sin, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." It is the same with our children. When they do wrong, we need to accept them and their feelings even if we don't like what they did.

Do you remember the story of Dorsey trying to play house with Lisa and Angela? If Lisa had hit Dorsey, her mother would have needed to stop the hitting right away. But she could be understanding of Lisa's feelings because Dorsey was provoking her with his behavior. Mother could be understanding even while she limited Dorsey's behavior.

There is a church school song that says;

"Sometimes my face looks grumpy,
Sometimes my face looks mad,
But the times I like the best
Are the times I'm feeling glad.

Sometimes I'm feeling frightened
Sometimes I'm feeling sad,
But the times I like the best
Are the times I'm feeling glad.

God planned my face to move,
To show just how I feel,
But you know God cares for me and you
No matter how we feel.¹⁴

God cares about us no matter how we feel. We need to show our children we care for them when they feel the aloneness, the

¹⁴ Faces by Pat Clinger. Copyright 1971 Graded Press.

loneliness of having done wrong. When children experience forgiving parental love, then they are experiencing a beginning understanding of God's redeeming love for each of us.

Recently I heard a celebrity say in an interview that if one of his teenage children broke a certain moral law that had been taught in the church as well as in their family, he would tell the child to leave the house and *never return*. He said that he would *never* see or speak to his child again. The interviewer was surprised at his strong reaction.

"Never?" she asked.

"Never," he replied. "It is the church's law and our family believes in the church."

I was surprised that he could not also consider Jesus' teachings about forgiveness and redemption.

Accepting Negative Feelings

How do we deal with our children's negative feelings that can leave them feeling lost and separated from those they love?

We must be able to accept their feelings. Feelings cannot be reasoned or explained away. When we can accept our children's feelings rather than putting a lid on them, we gain insight into their world that we wouldn't otherwise have and we help maintain their self-esteem.

Active Listening

It seems to me that listening to any person, adult or child, pour out their negative feelings is something like listening to their confession. They feel separated from a person or persons and look for some word or sign of comfort or assurance of love. The word or sign they look for may be like the words of assurance that the minister says after a congregational prayer of confession. Psalms 34:22 says:

"The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned."

When our children come to us with strong feelings, we need to listen with our hearts and help them feel restored to right relationship.

Jessica and Ben's nursery school class was returning from a field trip to the zoo. Everyone was tired and feeling cramped in the car. Jessica's mother was driving. Jessica and Ben were in the

back seat, competing for a special place to stretch out on the floor. As Ben succeeded in winning the favored place, Jessica said in a low voice, "I hate you, Ben."

Jessica's mother, overhearing the remark, said in a reproaching tone, "Oh, now Jessica, you know you don't hate Ben. He has been to your house and played. He is our neighbor, and he is in your class. You don't hate him, you like him."

All the time her mother was talking, Jessica was muttering softly to Ben, "I hate you. I hate you. I hate you."

"Jessica! That will be enough! It is not nice to say you hate someone." exclaimed Jessica's mother.

Jessica's mother denied rather than accepted Jessica's feelings. She did not allow Jessica any expression except positive feelings. If she could have been an active listener, that is, rephrased what she thought Jessica meant, then Jessica could have had the release of expressing her anger, fatigue and frustration. Her mother would have had more information and insight into Jessica's feelings and perhaps been able to help her solve her problem with Ben. Jessica would have felt close to her mother instead of separated.

The conversation could have gone something like this:

"I hate you, Ben," Jessica mutters.

"You and Ben seem to have a problem back there," intervenes Jessica's mother.

"Yes! Ben keeps getting the place I want on the floor!" Jessica responds.

"And that makes you angry?" her mother asks.

"Yes, I'm tired and I want to stretch out my legs!" says Jessica.

"You are tired and wish you could stretch out?" reflects her mother.

"Yes! How long before we get back to school?"

"Just a few minutes. Is there anything we could do to help you and Ben with your problem?" offers her mother.

"I wish he would get into the front seat so I could have the floor." says Jessica.

"Hey," says Ben, speaking for the first time. "Yeh, I want to get in the front."

"All right," replies her mother, "I'll stop the car so Ben can climb over."

With Ben settled in the front, Jessica stretches out on the floor

and everyone arrives at school feeling satisfied though still tired.

All feelings need expression whether positive or negative. If negative feelings are not expressed, the tension that goes with those feelings remains and eventually explodes or sneaks out. We have all heard stories about the man whose boss yells at him at the office. The man goes home and yells at his wife, or yells at his child.

The unexpressed feeling may eventually be vented at a person or an issue that was not the cause of the original anger. Suppression of negative feelings also tends to cause people, adults as well as children, to suppress all expression of feelings. When so much control is kept on expression of negative feelings, then expression of joy and happiness may also be suppressed. Some people who never smile can't because some unexpressed anger has weighted down their joy.

Finding Acceptable Outlets

The second thing we need to do to deal with our children's negative feelings is to help them express feelings in ways that are not harmful to themselves, other persons or property. We need to hear and accept the feelings but then help the children know how to express them in acceptable ways.

We have already mentioned active listening. Active listening, as we saw with Jessica's mother, means hearing and responding to the other person in a way that will help that person understand their feelings better. It means responding to non-verbal as well as verbal expressions.

"Hi, Stephanie," said Stephanie's father as he greeted her in front of school.

"Hello," said Stephanie glumly.

"What's the matter?" her father asked.

"Nothing," replied Stephanie with her head hanging.

"Your face looks sad. In fact, your whole body looks sad," observed her father.

"I'm not sad," said Stephanie.

"You look like something's wrong," he insisted. "Usually you come skipping out of kindergarten."

"Well," said Stephanie, "I got so mad this morning! I wanted to play in the hospital center and it was full *all* morning and I didn't get to and today was the last day for that center. I wish we

didn't have a planning board at school and we could go to any center no matter how many children were there!"

"I know it's hard," responded her father. "You wish you could just play in any center."

"Yeh," replied Stephanie softly.

Stephanie's father could see by her body language that she felt sad or disappointed. She said with her words that nothing was wrong, but he was sensitive to how she looked as well as what she said.

With very young children whose language is not as developed as that of a kindergartner, parents must become aware of non-verbal communication. They need to ask lots of questions that can be answered with a nod or shake of the head.

Parents can even listen actively and empathize with their children when they are reacting against the parents. This happens often when children must stop playing because their parents say it is time to do so.

Troy was playing outside on a warm summer evening. He had been riding his big wheel up and down the sidewalk with several other neighborhood friends. Now it was getting dark. His father called to him that he would need to come inside in ten minutes. Troy agreed. At the end of the time father said, "O. K., Troy, this is your last run. Go to the corner one more time and then we must go in."

"Aw, Daddy," Troy begged, "can't I stay out five more minutes?"

"I know you want to stay, but it's time for bed," his father said.

Troy made his last trip to the corner and returned. Then he continued to beg for more time.

"Troy," said his father, "I know you want to stay outside longer. You wish you could stay up all night and never go to bed! But we have to go in now."

"Daddy," whined Troy.

"Put your wheels in the garage now, Troy," insisted his father.

"All right," said Troy with resignation.

Troy's father was able to be firm with his limits while letting Troy know that he understood his feelings. If Troy had refused to come, his father could have picked him up—maybe kicking and screaming—and carried him to the house.

This combination of limits and empathy is a very important

key in dealing with children's behavior. When we can let children know that we really do understand how they feel, they don't feel the need to react so violently to limits. If Troy's father had reasoned with him that he had been outside for hours and that he needed sleep, Troy would have been doubly angry. First, because his father didn't understand his feelings and secondly, that he had to go to bed.

Allowing children to wish—to say how they would have things if they were in control—allows them to release the tension of living with a situation that they don't like. Sometimes adults are tempted to respond to a child's wish with—"Well, its never going to be that way so you can just forget it."

Such a response only adds to a child's feeling of powerlessness and separation from the parent. A response such as Stephanie's father made to her wish about the way her kindergarten class was run ("I know it's hard. You wish you could just play in any center.") helps her verbally express her dislike of a situation while having to live with it. Children I have taught in a day care class have really found help in being able to wish that they could stay at home, go to work with their parents, or have their mothers for teachers. When I could accept their wishes, much of the child's anger dissolved and they could enjoy the day.

A word of warning about wishing. Young children are not yet sure what their powers are. They have not completely separated fact from fantasy. Sometimes children will in anger wish for something bad to happen, such as, "I wish you would go away and never come back." Then sometimes they may believe that the wish itself will cause the bad thing to happen, as in a fairy tale.

If your children seem afraid of the power of their wishes, don't encourage wishing as a release. My kindergartner says, "I can always wish" when I am pouring on too many reasons why she can't do what she wants, but I have seen other children frightened by involvement in wishing.

Drawing, using clay, hammering nails, hitting a pillow or a doll are other acceptable outlets for anger and frustration. Drawing may be like wishing because children can draw the situation as they would like it or with themselves in power. Hitting, squeezing or rolling clay can replace hitting another person or property destruction.

Hitting a pillow or doll can be a substitute when two children have had difficulties, negotiations have broken down, and they have resorted to hitting. Adults should not permit children to hit one another. They can hit a pillow or something that will not be damaged. They can also wish to hit the person while they are hitting a thing.

One evening when my two children had been quibbling and hitting one another, I managed to get them to agree to express their feelings on the play dough. They each made a model of the other's face and smashed it. They repeated this several times and then began to make other things with the dough. They drained off their annoyance and went back to enjoying one another's company.

I discovered carpentry as an outlet with a boy in my class. We weren't sure what Bernardo was angry about, but he was always angry. One day when I suggested he hammer a nail into wood instead of emptying the trash can on the floor, he was able to change his activity. He took the hammer, raised it over his head and brought it crashing down. All the other children stood back, a little frightened because they knew the power of Bernardo's anger. He continued to pound for several minutes, then stopped. The director told me the next day that Bernardo's behavior had been unusually peaceful the afternoon before. The hammering helped him release his anger, for a while.

Young children can be taught to use "I" statements. By "I" statements I mean expressing feelings by statements such as "I feel angry because you took my truck!" "I" statements can express feelings without attacking the person to whom they are being expressed. "I" statements can be used as a safe outlet for negative feelings.

Dealing with Tantrums

Temper tantrums are expressions of anger and frustration. When children have tantrums, their feelings are so enormous that all they can do is cry, scream, kick, throw themselves on the floor, or hold their breath. Tantrums can be frightening to parents when it appears that children will hurt themselves. They can be embarrassing when children have tantrums in public.

How to deal with tantrums is a frequent question of parents. Children are so angry that you cannot reason with them.

Retaliation, such as spanking or a glass of cold water in the face, can only increase the anger. Such tactics also hurt communication and self-esteem. If parents give in to tantrums, they will increase. So what do we do? We ignore the tantrum.

Marla was watching television when her grandmother told her that supper would be ready in five minutes.

"But!" Marla looked indignant. "I was planning to watch the next program, too. I want to watch television while we eat supper."

"I know you like to watch the next program, and I'm sorry that something you like to watch is on during supper," said her grandmother.

"Well, supper should be later tonight," decided Marla.

"Maybe another night, but tonight your daddy has a meeting and needs to eat early," explained Grandmother.

Suddenly Marla threw herself on the floor screaming and kicking. Her grandmother returned to the kitchen to finish supper, not saying anything to Marla. Between sobs, Marla said, "If I can't watch television during supper, then I won't eat."

"That's your decision," replied her grandmother.

When Marla continued to scream as her father and grandmother sat down at the table, her father told her to go to her room to cry so loudly. Marla went to her room and slammed the door. A few minutes later she appeared in the dining room door.

"You seem to be feeling better now, Marla," her grandmother smiled. "I hope you will eat with us now."

Marla's grandmother and father did not give in to her rage, but neither did they give her a long lecture when she did come to the table. They were able to stay out of her anger, and they allowed her to "save face" when she returned. Marla was given a graceful way out of a difficult situation. While Marla was in her room, she relaxed and decided to retreat from the position she had so loudly defended just a few moments before.

Retreat is a risky decision because someone might point out such a change with remarks like "Oh, so you decided to behave like a civilized person." Such a remark hurts self-esteem and communicates no forgiveness. Forgiveness is the other element in saving face. We allow children to come back into the family circle, having been restored to good standing. Sometimes there

needs to be some discussion about the feelings involved in the incident. We must be empathetic, be able to see things from our children's point of view.

Parents Have Feelings, Too

Parents are persons, too. Parents have positive as well as negative feelings. Sometimes we lose our temper. Sometimes we feel hostility toward our children. How do we deal with these feelings? First, we must recognize them rather than deny them. If we deny negative feelings, we may feel depressed or even become ill. We can confess our feelings, get them out in the open, and then try to solve the problem involved.

When we lose our temper and explode at the children, we often feel embarrassed. We feel the same separation that children feel when they have done wrong. We need to be honest with our children. We can apologize for losing our temper without losing authority in our children's eyes. We can stand firm on the issue while expressing regret that feelings got out of hand. Is it too shocking to say that we can confess our wrong doing to our children and receive forgiveness from them? In doing so we teach our children how to behave after they have lost their temper.

Jesus Taught Forgiveness

Jesus said he came to complete the law (Matthew 5:17). The completion he brought involved redemption. We can be forgiven by God and saved from the trap of past behavior. We can begin again in right relationships. The story of the prodigal son is a clear example of God's forgiveness of us when we do wrong. The father runs down the road to greet his son even though the son has wasted his whole inheritance. The son will have to live with the consequences of his behavior, but his father still loves him and receives him into the household.

When our children have grown up experiencing forgiveness in the family, they can accept the idea of a forgiving God and of a Savior who calls us to repentance. When we love and forgive our children, we are preparing the foundation so they will be able to forgive others and to accept God's forgiveness.

Things to Think About

1. Can I accept my child's negative feelings? Can I accept my own?
2. What acceptable outlets do my children have for their anger, frustration, etc.? What do I have?
3. What can I do to improve the expression of all feelings in our house?
4. In which instances might I have let my child suffer the consequences of her/his behavior?