

PARENTING MATTERS

Volume 12

Newsletter

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Happy Spring – I hope the warmer weather comes soon, my garden is looking really brown! March has been a chaotic month in our household. Winter sports wound down, report cards were out, and my father needed surgery. When life throws you a curve ball, the whole family team needs to shift its priorities. So right now we are taking life one day at a time and teaching our children about positive thinking and prayer.

Recently I have had a number of calls from parents who are separating. The reasons why a couple decide to separate vary. Here are three case scenarios which require *intentional parenting* to help their children work through some difficult situations.

Case 1

On return from an overnight visit at their grandparents place, the children learned that their mother had moved their belongings to a new residence. When one spouse has a secret mission to leave the marriage, there is often more than just the break-up to negotiate. There is shock, and trust is immediately compromised. The “break-up parent” becomes the designated “bad guy”. Picking up the emotional pieces is now even harder as the family becomes divided.

The 12 year old daughter is hurt and angered by well intentioned comments from adult family friends. “Stop telling me it will be all right!” “Right now I am angry at my Mom for breaking up the family. All my Mom’s friends are telling me that it’s all okay and that life will be better.

Well it doesn't feel that way to me! I don't want things to get better. I want me and my family to be the way we were. What's wrong with these people? My life is being destroyed and they're saying it will be all right!" Her older brother is mad because he felt he was old enough to know about his mother's plan earlier. Her younger sister takes turns clinging to either parent, depending on their mood and neediness. She's a great comfort, and a distraction.

Case 2

Two teenage sons are traumatized by their Dad's anger. Now they are struggling with their allegiance to their Dad after witnessing his out of control behaviour. They minimize the impact of their father's anger on their parent's divorce so they can hold onto some of his love. Their mother understands their pain and conflict, and offers unending support. She keeps the doors of communication open. Family members recall memories of the couple's romantic beginnings. The sons tell me how hard it is for them to hear stories of how their parents met. Looking at wedding pictures and other early photos is hard because this separation doesn't make sense to them. They too are drumming up memories of the past and can't put their finger on any one event that could have broken them all apart. They want a reason to justify their pain.

Case 3

An 11 year old daughter unfortunately knows a painful truth. Although she has heard her father diplomatically talk about his part in the marriage breakdown, she nonetheless knows that her mother had an affair. She has been brought into the circle of lies and deceit, and is too scared to reveal her true feelings to either parent. As an only child, there is no one else with whom to share her shame. When I speak with her about her parents, she picks at her scabs until they bleed, and then tells me everything is fine.

She is worried that I will upset her parents if I share with them what she is going through.

If you were to meet any of these partners as I have, they are all thoughtful and caring and want to be supportive to their children during this time of family duress. Like most of us as parents, it hurts us to see our kids in pain or struggling or mad at us. *Intentional parenting* is about staying with your child's pain to help them come to terms with their reality. To help them grieve. *Intentional parenting* requires the parent to become the "emotional container". The parent needs to be open and not defensive or critical of how the child is feeling or communicating their understanding of the events.

To be the "emotional container" for your children, as a parent you need to *tune into the feelings* of your child.

Here are some examples of things you might say to help you *tune in*:

Case 1

"You're mad and you probably blame me for your unhappiness right now". "It's frustrating to hear people say 'it will all work out' when right now it doesn't feel like anything in your life is right".

Case 2

"I know I scared you guys, and I scared myself too. I bet you were worried that I was going to hurt someone in the house or myself. It was wrong of me to get out of control like that."

Case 3

Because this girl is not saying much, you might lead by commenting on her behaviours: "You seem worried about something. Your scabs are bleeding. Tell me what you're worried about?", or "I notice you're not

saying much these days. This break up must be hard for you. What's been the hardest?"

The goal is to help your child express their sadness and feelings of loss. This will help them grieve the loss of their family, as the once knew it. For some parents, providing this intense emotional support may feel threatening or awkward. They may feel defensive, as they are also feeling sensitive to the break-up. In these cases, outside support from a counsellor can often prove to be beneficial for the whole family.

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