
Foundations for Families

Introduction

The importance of developing skills and understandings in being parents is becoming more readily recognised now than it has been in the past. Within communities there is a perceived need to learn to cope with the increasing pressure being placed on parents to raise their children in a world whose values are becoming less and less based on God's principles. At the same time, part of the family raising process is the need to recognise the growing child's perspective. Our children are growing up in a world that seems to exploit them commercially, and places enormous pressures on them socially. Paul's advice not to be 'conformed to this world' is very hard for a child and young person who hasn't yet fully developed values based on God's principles.

Religious organisations have for decades emphasised the need for children and young people to develop a strong faith in God and a commitment to His principles. In our current society, this development and commitment is arguably more important than ever. *Foundations for Families* provides thought provoking and practical help to parents.

Index of essays

Family context

- Introduction
- 1 Scriptural Principles - man and woman
- 2 Scriptural Principles - families; love
- 3 Scriptural Principles - children: aims - salvation
- 4 Parenting skills - family patterns and relationships
- 5 Parenting skills - teamwork
- 6 Parenting skills – communicating

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Foundations for Families – Family context

1 Scriptural Principles – man and woman

Reading – 1 John 4:7-11 *Keywords* – love; live; know; sacrifice for our sins

Introduction

Being part of a family is one of the great blessings of God. At some stage of our life we have all been part of a family. We were all born of the union of a man and a woman. At the least we had a mother to look after us in the first days of our life. Many of us grew up in a family environment of a mother and father, although we must always be aware that some children grow up in a different environment. Some, for example, may have been left without a natural mother because of her death. Some may have been born outside of marriage and might have never known their father. Some might have been placed into foster care or have been adopted.

Notwithstanding some of these variations, in perhaps the vast majority of circumstances, we have grown up in a family. The prime care may not have been offered by natural parents but, nonetheless, we were still part of a family.

There is a prime need for a family. Human children are born with very little innate ability to look after themselves. We can observe other animals who instinctively search for mother's milk, or foals, for example, who can stand up and walk (or is it totter?) very soon after birth. Human babies need to be helped by the mother (or medical staff) right from the start of life and continue to need that help for considerable time.

Thus, the family, mother and baby, is vital from the beginning. Of course, where it is possible - and this would be in most circumstances - the added, and vital - assistance of the father and other family help can contribute significantly to the well-being of the child and the mother.

When we consider Scriptural principles and examples in the notes, we are looking at the ideal. It is important that we have outstanding models. The fact that we do not always maintain the ideals in our married life is no reason not to strive to reach them. Getting closer to the ideal can be most rewarding.

Born through love

In most cases a child today is born through the intimacy of a husband and wife. The two have spent some time together developing their relationship before marriage so that at the time they are married they try to become one spiritually and can then become one physically.

That this happens has been determined by God. In this way the complete foundation for family development is established.

The first marriage

In one sense the first marriage was not one of love between a man and a woman although the reason for the union is clearly given in Scripture. God determined to make man in His own image (Genesis 1:26) and He made a woman as a companion for the man.

‘This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh’ said Adam, and the Scripture continues

‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.’ (Genesis 2:23,24)

Right from the start God set down a principle for marriage - that the husband and wife should be a unit. That unity was created by God.

The reason for this unity

Why should we place so much importance on this act of creation? There are many aspects of family life suggested in the Scriptures and we will look at some of these later on. The one that is of most importance here at the moment is that the union of Adam and Eve and the importance of marriage is a model of the great union between Christ and his church or ecclesia at Christ's return and the establishment of God's kingdom.

One of the great beauties of Scripture is the promise of eternal life. This promise is inextricably linked with the concept of a husband and wife. The Apostle Paul gives some detail of this in Ephesians chapter 5. In some advice to husbands and wives he states that the husband is head of the wife just as Christ is head of the ecclesia (v. 23). He very specifically compares the husband and wife relationship with Christ and his ecclesia - the believers. Later (v. 25) he states that husbands should love their wives just as Christ loved the ecclesia and 'gave himself for her'. There is nothing more explicit or more loving than this! And he continues '... that he might present her to himself a glorious ecclesia.' Jesus gave the ultimate for his family - his followers - his life.

By the way, while ultimately the concept is that the husband is the head of the wife, this does not imply dictatorial actions and behaviour. Equally, the husband needs to love and nurture his wife - even to the extent, if we follow Christ's example, of laying down his life for his wife. Far from being some kind of supremacy, what is indicated is an ultimate love of the husband for the wife; a partnership.

He stresses the need for love - that husbands should love their wives (v.28) and that wives should love their husbands (v. 33). Paul even quotes Genesis in this passage. He states (v.30) 'For we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' 'This is a profound mystery, but I am talking about Christ and the ecclesia.' (v.32)

The family basis, then, is the supreme love between a husband and wife, just as there is supreme love between Christ and his ecclesia.

But it goes further than this. One of Jesus' parables related to the story of the virgins waiting for the bridegroom to appear. They had to be ready and waiting for the bridegroom. Jesus will return to the earth and his bride will be waiting for him. And when he returns there will be a marriage. This is referred to in Revelation as the 'Marriage Supper of the Lamb'.

The ultimate reward is referred to in Revelation. The nineteenth chapter is about the time of the reward. When Christ returns he will meet his bride - she who has made herself ready for the husband so that the wedding can take place.

'Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.' (v. 7)

'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' (v.9).

And, of course, there are other most important reasons for marriage. We have mentioned the issue of companionship. There is also the importance of mutual support for wife and husband. The family pattern might also include the teamwork associated in raising children and of combined support in the service of God.

The one great foundation. This brings with it magnificent privileges and joy, and great responsibilities.

Transferring this to our family

The reason for going into this in such detail is simply that there is no greater foundation for the beginning of family life than that given in the Scriptures. The foundation of companionship was given in the beginning. The fact that it did not work out well at first is no reason to doubt its importance to us now. It is so vital that our families are based on the foundations of Scripture. Jesus made a commitment to his bride. It was based on supreme love. Ultimate love. Husbands and wives need to love one another totally - to the ultimate test if necessary. And through the ages, there have been many practical examples of wonderfully devoted couples where one has spent much time completely devoted to the other where the circumstances have needed this.

Something to think about

- In what practical ways do you see yourselves in the devoted position where you will practically work with you husband/wife in a most loving situation?
- Give some examples of the positive, easier ways to demonstrate love.
- And now some when devoted love is just a tad more difficult!

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Foundations for Families – Family context

2 Scriptural Principles – families; love

Reading – 1 John 4:7-11 *Keywords* – love; live; know; sacrifice for our sins

Families in Scripture

What are the qualities of good parents? There are some beautiful lessons to be learned by looking at examples of parents and families in the Scriptures. They are summarised below but the questions will help you to tease out some of the important elements.

Honour father and mother (Law of Moses)

‘Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you.’ (Exodus 20:12)

There is a number of key ideas here. It is important that we honour – respect, admire – both our parents. The interesting thing here is that if all generations did this, there would be a longevity of peacefulness in our lives, no matter the stage of our life. The other key idea is that what we have is given by God. In other words, God gives us our land (house, environment) therefore we should show respect for the people who are responsible for providing some of this heritage for us. At the same time, we should show respect and admiration for our Heavenly Father.

A compassionate father

‘As a father pities his children so the Lord pities them that fear Him.’ (Psalm 103:13)

The context of this verse suggests that fathers (no need to be too specific here) – parents show compassion on their children when they do the wrong thing. (Have a look at verse 12). And what is the role model for this? God Himself. Just as He has compassion on us if we fear (read – reverence) Him.

Something to think about

- In what ways can we show direct compassion to our children in the circumstances indicated by these verses?

About wives and mothers

‘Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house, your children like olive plants all around your table.’ (Psalm 128:3)

The picture here is quite vivid. It indicates the importance of a wife in the family by being the centre of the house. While being fruitful undoubtedly refers to having children because of its context, other passages in Scripture also imply that being fruitful is showing a wonderful character. This leads to being an example for children who surround the table in the house.

The image of the olive plant is also picturesque. Children, as plants, need to be nurtured to grow and it is important to realise that eventually these also become fruitful in character and also possibly in terms of having children.

Interestingly, grandparents are mentioned in this Psalm (v.6). The whole Psalm is about God’s blessings. If we fear (reverence) God and walk in His directions, if we work for our living, if we have a wife of great character and children being nurtured, we will be very satisfied grandparents!

Incidentally, the first woman, was given the name Eve - which means, 'life-giving'. Most appropriate. And, what an example to the young Timothy his mother (Eunice) and his grandmother (Lois) were. Timothy, said Paul, had genuine faith, and this was shown first in Lois and then in Eunice. (2 Timothy 1:5)

About husbands and fathers

Husbands need to honour and respect their wives. In most instances, the vows that a couple make to each other during the wedding service include words similar to this. And, remember, a vow is a vow. It is/was made solemnly. The practical ways in which a husband can honour these vows are many. The prophet Malachi indicates that one important way is not to 'deal treacherously with the wife of your youth' (Malachi 2:15). This advice seems to be given to a husband of some years. It doesn't really matter, the point is made that the honour of a husband to his wife, and loyalty to each other, are vital.

The problem with our current society is that wives and husbands tend to move in and out of marriage (if they, in fact, do marry) and really deal 'treacherously' with one another. Despite some people who protest to the contrary, marriage break-ups affect the emotional stability of both partners, and especially children where there are some. Malachi says that one of the reasons for marriage is to have 'godly offspring' (not just 'offspring'). Having godly children is going to be easier to achieve where the parents are united in their approach to the wonderful task they have in front of them.

Something to think about

- What are the good experiences from our own life where we can observe the outstanding examples of the way in which children honour their fathers, and the fathers demonstrate they deserve that honour?

About husbands and wives

While Proverbs 31 speaks mostly about the characteristics of a beautiful and virtuous wife, there is one key verse that indicates the way in which a husband, and children, should respect the wife and mother. 'Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her.' (v.28) There's quite a lot of instruction here. The children will want to see their mother happy or blessed, because of the beautiful person she is, but at the same time, they should. Similarly, the husband. He not only regards her happily but he openly praises her. In this way he is acknowledging her value for himself (he shows that he thinks about his wife) but he also sets an example for the children. These verses again illustrate the value of the family.

One of the great passages of Scripture relating to wives and husbands is in 1 Peter 3. This is a chapter that can be seen on the surface as being male dominated, at least in some ways. But a closer look shows that it is very sensitive to the relationship between the husband and wife.

What are the principles in this chapter? It starts with a statement about wives needing to be submissive to their husbands. There are many people in our society that won't accept this notion. But a close reading will demonstrate an important point. Firstly, the reason for submission is based on an important Scriptural principle explained in Ephesians 5. The relationship, says Paul, between a husband and wife is the same as between Christ and his ecclesia. Christ is the bridegroom who takes the responsibility for his bride, the ecclesia. Jesus took so much responsibility that he gave his life for his bride! In this chapter, Paul is giving the reason why the husband should be the partner that accepts responsibility in the family. Jesus took the lead and the responsibility. Part of the acceptance of responsibility is

that he case and nurtures us. . We show respect and love for him in return because of what he has shown us. His ecclesia, those baptised into him, need to submit to him. At the same time, he has shown unparalleled love for his bride. Despite the mores of our current society, God wants the relationship between a husband and wife to be based on responsibility and respect.

Something to think about

- In what practical ways can a husband and wife demonstrate mutual respect in their relationship, particularly with respect to decision making in a) normal domestic arrangements – budgets, for example, and b) with decision relating to the raising of children?

Parents - dedication to God

One of the things we will be looking at in the third essay is the purpose we have for our children. How important is it that we have a purpose for them? It's vital. We have seen how the Scriptures clearly indicate that we have a responsibility to nurture and respect our children. Despite some modern thinking, we must realise that it is not in the best interests of our children to let them be 'free spirits', to let them 'make their own decisions', certainly not in the childhood years. They need guidance and understanding. They need caring parents who will guide them within the framework of Scripture and who will respect that they need to nurture their children through the various stages of their development.

This ultimately means that parents should be dedicated to the service of God. There are a few verses that emphasise this and these are indicated below.

'But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness ...' (Matthew 6:33). These are the words of Jesus suggesting that we need to pursue his Father's kingdom first. Is this selfish? No, not at all, because the point about God's Kingdom is that it will ultimately lead to what Paul indicates as a time when God will be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28). We can unselfishly dedicate ourselves to searching for that time of oneness and greatness. If we do that, then we are providing a great example for our children.

Placing God first in our own lives sets a good example. King Solomon had a useful thought for us on this: 'The righteous man leads a blameless life; blessed are his children after him.' Proverbs 20:7. He was convinced that children who see a good example from their parents will reap the rewards of that example in their own lives.

The Apostle John gave the key to setting the example when he indicated that God's command was to demonstrate love. 'And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.' 2 John 1:6. We obey God first and this demonstrates love - for one another, and especially for our children.

Foundations for Families – Family context

3 Scriptural Principles - children: aims – salvation; ‘completeness’

Reading – Luke 2:42-52 *Keywords* – listening; asking; understanding; obedience; wisdom; stature

Children - a heritage of the Lord

‘Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one’s youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.’ (Psalm 127:3-5)

These verses amplify verse 1 that refers to the ‘house’. There is no doubt that the Psalmist regards children, where having children is possible, as a vital element in a household. Other translations suggest that children are a gift of God. In the sense that if we place ourselves in God’s hands everything we have is given by God, children are certainly a gift. It is vital for us to be grateful for God’s gift and show our appreciation by the time and effort we put into helping in the development of the household.

While we rejoice over the gift of our children, let us be thoughtful for those who are unable to have children. In many cases they would dearly love to have them, but, for reasons over which they have no control, they may be childless. This may mean that sometimes a couple will have a burden they find hard to accept. Even though they pray for help, God’s answer, for His best reasons, may be ‘no’. Parents with children need to be sensitive to those without. And in many ways, we can embrace those without children into our own families, part of the great blessing of extended families.

Something to think about

- In what ways can we show our consideration of couples without children in helping them to be part of our own family?

Jesus – ‘my Father’s house’

‘Why were you searching for me?’ he asked. ‘Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?’ (Luke 2:49)

Some translations use the word ‘house’ here. Others use the word ‘business’. Actually, there is no word in the Greek at all. What is clear from the context is that Jesus was found in the ‘House’ of God – the Temple. It is obvious from the context that he was trying to learn as much about his Father (divine parent) as possible.

Jesus’ concept of priorities

‘So He said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come everlasting life.'" (Luke 18:29-30)

This seems pretty tough. Does Jesus mean that we should leave our families? Haven’t we already seen a number of passages that show the importance of families? The hard words here indicate that our priorities in life must always be those associated with placing God and His Kingdom first in our lives. In most circumstances, this will involve being with our families. Notice that there is an implied vital importance about families in these verses. The fact is that He mentions, virtually as a last resort, that, if necessary, we give up the most important aspect of our lives to place God first.

What aims do you have for your children?

Given that children are a 'heritage from the Lord', what aims do we have for them? It would seem clear that our aim would be to bring them up in the 'training and instruction of the Lord' (Ephesians 6:4). If our own aim is to serve God and to look forward to the time when the earth will be filled with His glory (Numbers 14:21), isn't it reasonable for us to want the same for our children? To help them achieve this do we not need to provide instruction and training for them?

Sometimes, this notion of instruction and training seems to be at odds with current educational principles where children are encouraged to discover aspects of life rather than be taught. The two elements are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Parents can guide children's discovery. Certainly, in education, it has been shown that children who discover for themselves are more likely retain memory and more meaningfulness of their discovery if they have discovered for themselves.

Something to think about

- In what practical ways can we both instruct our children, and help them to discover, essential aspects of living?

What is completeness?

We often hear of the idea in discussions on education that children should become 'complete' people. While this sounds good, everyone does not necessarily agree on what completeness is.

Think of all the single words you can think of that, in total, would add up to the grown up child being complete. You've probably come up with a very long list. When you examine it in relation to yourself, you may find that the aim for your children might be just a little high, unless you are perfection yourself!

How can we help our children become complete? The Scriptures give us some guidance. Paul in his letter to the Galatians outlined the Fruit of the Spirit, that is, those qualities of character that are demonstrated by a person whose life has been influenced by God through His Spirit.

'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.' (Galatians 5:22-23)

Something to think about

- How do we practically help in the development of the fruit of the Spirit that are so important in forming the complete child?

The ultimate goal?

Paul wrote to the younger Timothy. He made it clear that learning the Scriptures was the key element for gaining salvation – eternal life.

'... and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.' (2 Timothy 3:15)

Should not helping our children 'be wise for salvation' be an important goal for us as parents?

In between ...

This can be hard. It is important that we have general aims for how we would like our children develop, but in between, and in the finer detail, our dilemmas can increase. We need to try to forge a relationship between what is ideal in the broad sense and how we reach that ideal through everyday decision making.

Something to think about

- At home – what TV do we allow children to watch? What books to read?
- At school – in what activities do we encourage them to become involved?
- Do we have specific ambitions for what vocation our children may follow, or do we let them choose for themselves?

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Foundations for Families – Family context

4 Parenting skills - family patterns and relationships

Reading – Matthew 6:25-34 *Keywords* – life; righteousness, kingdom; tomorrow

Where to start

So far we have looked at the Scriptural foundations for the family – the loving relationship between mother and father, and the role and purpose of children that form part of the family. We should always recognise that not all families are made up of mother, father, boy and girl. There are many variations. For a variety of reasons it may well be that there may be more children, or that there is only one parent (or grandparents, or other relatives) who have the prime responsibility in the raising of children. When we are considering the following family issues, we should keep in mind the ways in which the circumstances of the family, however it is made up, will affect how decisions are made.

Patterns

Have you noticed that families have their own life-style patterns? For example, some families get up at a special time and have a specific order of doing things early in the morning. They have set tasks for various members of the family. They congregate (or separate) in various parts of the house and at 'usual' times. They may go to bed at different times. Many of these patterns will be determined by the age of the children and what activities and schools they are involved in, by the work carried out by the adults, and many other responsibilities that each family member may have.

Something to think about

- Think about your own family pattern. What are its main characteristics? You may find it useful to think of a particular day. Let's say, Tuesday. How did the day start? What did each member of the family do during the day? How typical was it? What were its high points? What were its low points? Try to think of everyone's perspective – for example, how do you think your husband/wife felt about the day? And your children?

Family aims and directions

The reason for thinking about the direction that your family is taking is that there could be a danger that it just drifts from day to day with no particular goal or plan. A problem with drifting is that the family might end up like the boat that, without rudder or oars, gets carried around with the wind or the current and ends up going nowhere.

Something to think about

- What are the key aspects of your family's direction at the moment?
- Now, within the framework of the first two essays, work out the aims or direction you believe would be useful to follow.

Changing patterns

As a result of personally considering the previous questions, you may well find that there are some directions that need change and some that you would like to change. How would you go about this? You might consider the following:

- Change needs to be gradual.
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- Change needs to be agreed to and put into practice by everyone involved, including the proposer! In other words, it's 'we' who may need to change, not 'you'.
- Remember that change is more easy with the little 'things'. But, this is the place to start. It's trite, but very true, to repeat the saying, 'big journeys start with little steps'.
- Time is needed for long lasting change to take place. It would be useful to monitor the changes regularly, to see if they are taking place.
- Some changes may need to be immediate, especially if what needs to be changed is harmful to other members of the family.
- Don't forget to include the children in family discussions about changes.

Balancing work, religious, school and family life

Family life is often a balancing act. There are so many conflicting and competing influences that many families become stressed in trying to balance everything. What are some of the pressures?

Money – there is little doubt that the cost of living is rising. Housing is more expensive as is food. And there are many social pressures to have what 'just everyone' has – and we are constantly bombarded in advertising on what these 'necessities' of life are.

Leaving aside the things that are advertised, it often happens in many societies that in order to cope, both husband and wife take a job each. This can lead to easing financial difficulties but can lead to other problems.

Family integration – where both mother and father work there can be less time for them to spend with their children and with each other. The children can become less supervised and a feeling of less care and this can lead to family tensions and a lack of communication. Childcare – this is becoming more prevalent where, in order for the family to be more financially secure, children are put into childcare to enable both parents to work. A variation of this is where the grandparents help with the care.

The activity 'circus' – where parents and children go around in circles from one activity to another. The aim of this is for children to have meaningful activities that help in their general growth. These activities can be ecclesial, school, extra-curricular and so on.

Job pressures – every job seems to have its own set of pressures. Some may have long hours; some are stressful in both short and long term; some require the absence of the father for varying periods.

A key element of trying to achieve a balance is to spend some time with the whole family sitting down and identifying the pressures, the problems and the activities and then prioritising them. The first step in such a planning session is to put God first in reading and prayer. We need His guidance in all our lives and asking His help in faith will go a long way in achieving the balance.

Something to remember – sometimes as parents we can be very committed to trying to do the best for our children and have them involved in so much that they don't have time to be children. Let's make sure they have time just to be themselves.

Something to think about

- Try to identify the key pressures in your family. Ask your family to help in the identification.
- Think of three key things you would like to do each day to ensure some family 'togetherness' time. (What have you, or other families found successful?)
- Make a list of a few activities your family can do together at various times.

Family processes

We've mentioned that families are made up of very dynamic relationships. The aim of the family is to live, play and work together for the benefit of all members. Often, part of the social activity is the interaction between brothers and sisters (and between brothers and brothers, and sisters and sisters). This can be very enriching for each of them. There are however, times when the interaction is not so enriching and can be simply tense.

The most important thing to recognise in a family is that each member is different. Each member needs to be regarded as being different and that difference needs to be respected by all.

Family management

You've probably realised by now that parents need to develop good skills in family management. Being able to recognise each member in the family (mother, father and children) as having their own integrity, caring for them and, above all, loving them and then trying to manage all of the good and bad times together is so important, as is recognising the way God can assist us is most important.

Something to think about

- Think of five skills (virtues might be another word) that you believe you need to help in the management of the family. Try to think of specific instances in your own family life as you can to help you identify the skills.

Some verses to think about

Here are some verses about family relationships. You might like to read them and have a quick discussion about the importance of each.

- Leviticus 19:32 – honouring older people
- Romans 12:9 and Romans 13:8 – respect for one another
- Ephesians 6:1 – children obeying parents
- Exodus 20:12 – honouring parents

Foundations for Families – Family context

5 Parenting skills - teamwork

Reading – Ephesians 2:17-22 *Keywords* – foundations stone; building; peace

Teamwork

You will recall from the second essay that it is important to place considerable emphasis on mother and father sharing responsibilities, and the workload. Parenting is a matter of team work. In our current society there is a greater emphasis on mother and father sharing many tasks, especially if both need to work to maintain financial support for the family.

One of the Biblical pictures you might imagine in your working together is that of the oxen joined together with the yoke. (Matthew 11:29-30) While we don't see too many oxen around these days, we certainly know what it means. The two oxen are inextricably joined together so that they can pull together in the one direction. They wouldn't get anywhere if they tried to go in separate directions. Of course, the yoke in our case is the bond of love in Christ. There can be no greater bond, nor a more effective one.

Something to think about

- What are some of the main ways parents can share the workload in the raising of a family? When thinking about this, try to think more broadly at the beginning than just dividing up 'chores'. As a hint, you might start with how you determine goals and priorities. High on this list might be your spiritual foundations.
- What are some keywords (ideas) that must form the basis of your teamwork? Once you have looked at broad issues, try to tease out some of the more 'nitty gritty' activities that demonstrate teamwork.

Getting the most out of each other

It is vital that in the parent partnership that there are three elements: you, me and we. This implies that there must be awareness between parents of the unique contribution each can make to the team. This is standard in any team isn't it? We all know that a team requires commitment on behalf of all members. You can probably think of examples where teamwork falls down when one (or more) members of a team are not respected by the others. Sometimes the lack of respect might have a basis. Others it may not. However, each team has its own unique makeup. Can you imagine a cricket team made up of magnificent batsmen but no bowlers, or excellent bowlers but no batsmen? Can you imagine the cricket team with a wicket keeper who doesn't very well? It's the same in a family team. Each member is unique and can make a specific contribution for the benefit of the family.

And let's not forget who the real Captain is! (Hint: it's not the father, mother or any of the children!)

Something to think about

- Try to think of your own family. What unique contribution can you make? What unique contribution can your wife/husband make? What unique contribution can each of the other family members make?
 - Putting all the resources together, what contribution can you all make as a whole to a rich family life in which every member is respected?
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Planning

One of the great things about parenting is the opportunity to share in planning. Sometimes either parent can plan something without consultation with, or consideration for, the other. Sometimes, both parents can plan something without input from the children. While children's ages may not mean that they always have a broad perspective on what is being planned, they can respond to the fact that they at least have been involved in the planning process. This planning can be carried out at a family 'meeting'. The meeting doesn't always need to be formal or scheduled. Often good 'meetings' simply arise spontaneously out of a discussion around the dinner table. Come what may, any planning should involve consultation with God through prayer. Don't leave Him out of the discussions.

Something to think about

- Work out a program or activity that needs planning. Prepare a few ideas on how you might go about the planning process. Think of the people involved and try to think of what their reaction to the plan might be – and their possible contribution to the discussions. Remember, that in this class discussion, the emphasis is on the process of planning rather than the outcome.

Lone parents

While these discussion notes are largely based on the notion of a family of mother and father and say, one, two children (or more), the same principles can be applied to single parent families. The situation generally can be more difficult. In most cases, the processes could be similar. However, a disadvantage might be that the single parent has to take on more responsibility, in fact, the responsibility of just about everything that happens in the family.

In many cases the single parent has the disadvantage of not having someone close to them to talk over the issue. No matter what our own situation is, it is important that we are aware of the families around us and the circumstances in which they find themselves. We might try to understand their situation and try to be sensitive to their different needs. Where it is possible and welcome, we might try to embrace them in our own family circumstances, especially if we have children at around the same age. While this might not be always possible, the support that could be shown to the single parent in general, may help them through some very difficult times.

Something to think about

- Try to put yourself in the place of a single parent. How would you go about the teamwork that we have discussed here. What differences in planning can you imagine?
- In what practical ways could you go about helping someone who is a single parent?
- In what practical ways could a single parent help you in planning?

Handling parental conflict

It happens! Parents disagree – the issues may be lesser or greater. They may have only momentary consequences or they may be more far-reaching. Why do they happen? Because parents are humans and humans disagree with one another at times. But we know that sometimes it's not just a matter of disagreeing about something. Sometimes we have a point to make, or we feel something very strongly, and our view isn't necessarily the same as that

of our wife or husband. Our disagreements can range from simple household distribution of duties to more fundamental ways of helping raise our children.

How do we try to resolve these conflicts? The Scriptural principle is to show love to one another and to talk through the issues. We should never lose track of the words of the Apostle John -

‘Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.’ (1 John 4:7)

And we can take the words of Jesus Matthew 18:15 very liberally– when we have a parental disagreement we should talk to our brother (or sister/husband/wife) about it. The lines of communication are important.

Something to think about

- Jot down a few words that itemise the kind of conflicts (relating to families) that occur in household. Don’t think too deeply about them for the moment. Let the list just ‘roll out’.
- Now that you have your list, group them into those that are more important and those less important.
- Choose one of each of the less and more important groups and suggest a ways you might address the conflict.

Parental styles

We might be able to hold many disagreements at bay by respecting our partner and his/her views and also recognising that there are different parenting styles. The styles can be related to our personalities. Essentially, we are all different and it is so important for us to recognise the differences and work to their strengths. One parent might be exceptionally active and a little volatile and the other the quieter, steadier type. While this can sometimes lead to conflicts, through patient discussion and a mutual recognition of the value in each other’s personality, the family can benefit immensely.

Dealing with specific conflicts

The extent to which time is spent in trying to resolve an issue may depend on the seriousness of the issue itself. Some less major conflicts might be readily resolved. Others will take greater time. There are many ways to resolve conflicts – the following is just one. (You might like to discuss others that you are aware of in later discussion.)

Prayer – seeking God’s guidance to help you achieve your agreement. A short Bible reading of a few verses (say, from the Psalms) will help to create a peaceful atmosphere.

Defining goals – work out what each of you is trying to achieve in the issue you are facing.

Finding areas of agreement – try to find areas where you agree (it’s all too easy to find the disagreeable areas!)

Take a break – have a temporary break from your discussion so that there is time for the different views to be assimilated.

Persist – don’t give up in ‘exasperation’ because you cannot reach agreement. Go through the process again and try to find a way that will lead to the conflict resolution. It may mean that one or both may need to compromise their position a little.

Remember, though, that taking Paul's advice can be very helpful:

'In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.'

Ephesians 4:26

A final comment

We should always recognise that conflict will occur. How we handle it will determine the way in which we can create a positive atmosphere in our family. And this is the main point – we should turn conflict into a very positive experience. We can be richer by going through the process of discussion. We should always make sure that we discuss – and a prime part of discussion is **listening!**

Laurence Lepherd

Foundations for Families – Family context

6 Parenting skills - communicating

Reading – Proverbs 8:1-11 *Keywords* – wisdom; understanding; prudence; instruction; knowledge

Communicating clearly

One important aspect of being a parent is communicating clearly with each other and with children. It is important that parents talk with each other about their goals. These goals might embrace many aspects of bringing up children, from everyday 'yes' or 'no' situations to longer term goals such as schooling. Open, tense, disagreements between parents in the children's presence can make life very confusing for them. And, children can be very astute and try to manipulate their parents sometimes, especially when they see that parents disagree.

Day to day communication with children

It is vital that we are positive in our communication. At the same time, what we say must be kind, thoughtful and loving. We won't always be perfect in what we say or the way we say it. It is important, however, that we try to use the appropriate principles. Choose words carefully and convey exactly what we want our children to hear or do.

What children really hear

Here are some examples of poor communication with children. Why are they poor?

Would you like to hold my hand as we cross the road?

I want you to pick up your toys.

Don't pick at your food.

Now children, I can hear a lot of noise coming from your room (said in a suitably admonishing tone and loud voice!)

Rephrase the examples so that the communication is clearer.

Something to think about

- Dig down deeply into your own communication attempts, or what you have heard others say, (be honest!) and give some instances of poor communication with children and how you would improve them.

Getting our message across clearly

While the first step in communication with children is to ensure that we speak clearly and decisively, we shouldn't forget the importance of body language. Here are some things to think about:

Voice – tone, volume, inflection, speed of delivery

Face – smile, frown, raised eyebrow

Arms – placement (hips, extended), speed of movement

Hands – outstretched, open, palms up or down, pointing

Don't be negative when we talk

There are a number of good, positive expressions to use (and expressions not to use) when communicating with children. It's always better to make a positive statement than a negative one, although the latter may be useful in some circumstances, especially if a little fear can be useful. Too much negative instruction can produce a negative response, a kind of defiance.

So, what's wrong with the subheading above?

Things to say

Be gentle

Speak quietly

Come away, hands off

Tell the truth

Move carefully

Walk slowly

Things not to say

don't hit

don't shout

don't touch

don't lie

don't be clumsy

don't run

Something to think about

- Make a few more expressions to use for yourself – and their matching 'avoiding' expressions.

Requests and instructions

Implied in all of the above is a message that we need to distinguish between a request and an instruction. The difference is fairly simple. One asks a child to do something – which, of course, they may care to refuse, and the other makes it clear that they are required to do something – there is no choice. There is a time and place for each. In the first we may want to help a child to learn a better way of behaviour so that they can eventually become instinctive in their response to a similar situation. They are required to think about whether they accept the request or not. In the second we don't want them to think about it – just do it! Can we see that too much of either approach has disadvantages?

Something to think about

- Can we be too polite?
- Should we ever raise our voice?

Active listening

The one of the senses we have left until last is probably the most important – the ability to listen. We can talk easily – listening carefully is more difficult! Most specialists in communication insist that listening actively and attentively is crucial in any aspect of our life, and equally important in dealing with our children.

- We pay attention to what is said and respond appropriately. Comment on this example: 'I have a really exciting day today, dad, we're going swimming this afternoon.' 'That's nice. Have you finished your homework?'

- We pay attention to the way things are said and respond with a 'paraphrase'. This helps the child by indicating that we have understood what has been said. 'I'm really excited, dad.' 'Oh, so you're really thrilled are you?' 'Yes, I'm going ...' The simple repetition encourages the child to go further. It shows that you have heard what they have said. (Better than saying 'That's nice'.)

Repeating ourselves

'If I've told you once, I've told you a dozen times, go and ...'

Such a statement has many problems, not the least of which is that if we've made this statement, our first, and every other 'telling' to our child must have been totally unconvincing! If we need to say something any more than twice at the most, we really do need to examine what we've said and the way we say it.

But, repetition is an important element in learning. So many things children learn are through repetition. It can be used as a very powerful instrument of learning, when it is used wisely. The example above is not a wise use. However, getting children to repeat something – either in action or in words, can be very helpful for them. Repetition is important in the learning and retention process.

Parenting with love

A fitting conclusion to this series of essays is to stop to think of what it means to parent with love. There is no doubt that love is the basis of successful parenting. And we must start with understanding the role God plays in the development of this love.

'One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these.'" (Mark 12:28-31)

Something to think about

- Make your own list of parental 'loves'. They can be broad e.g. 'person love' or specific 'a-hug-a-day'.