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**Presentation Transcript**  
**Parenting for Faith – Feelings**  
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The title of this presentation is *Parenting for Faith Development*, number 6. It's about *Feelings*.

Children – like adults – have strong negative emotions – anger, sadness, fear. How to express these feelings, without feeling like a bad person, is always an issue for kids. So when we help children express those kinds of feelings in a constructive way, without judging them, then it helps them feel closer to us and like we care about them. So, how would you do that? Well, here are some ways to go about doing this.

Let's say that you tell a friend of yours that you are really angry because you got cut off in traffic. And they tell you, "No, you're not angry. You just got temporarily frustrated." How would that affect you? Well, since you are laying on the horn, screaming at the top of your lungs, and giving them the one-digit salute, you would think, "I don't know what planet you come from, but it's not mine!" We do this to children *all the time!*. We *deny* how they feel.

When our children come in our room in the middle of the night and tell us that they are afraid because of a nightmare, we say, "It's okay. It's only a dream." Right? We just deny the whole thing. So what will they think when we tell them that? Well, they're likely to believe that they are weak or deficient for being afraid, because kids take their cues from adults. And they also know that you don't live on the same planet with them. So it's a disconnect when we deny the feelings of our children.

When we see children suffering from the loss of a parent or sibling, everything in us wants to fix the pain for them, because it's really hard to watch children suffering. So we say something like, "I know, somehow, everything is going to turn out all right." Probably the worst thing you can say to a kid. "Well, why? Because it doesn't feel okay now." And you're kind of sending them a message that they *should* feel okay now. So it causes children to wonder if there is something wrong with them. By saying things like that, instead of drawing close, it causes them to feel disconnected from us.

So the best thing that we can do to acknowledge strong feelings is to go *with* it. “That was a terrible dream! It woke you up and you wanted to be close to us because you were so frightened by it.” That’s the way you go with that.

The principle there is that, when children’s feelings are accepted, they feel respected and valued. Instead of stuffing strong, negative feelings, that they’re going to have to work through later as adults and, which become triggers for them, they can learn how to express those feelings in positive and constructive ways. I’m not talking about tantruming here. I’m talking about learning *how* to deal with your feelings. And you do that by practice.

The second thing that I wanted to mention is to have an *outlet* for feelings.

A mother and a teenage son came to me some time back. They agreed that they were having trouble communicating. He had gotten so angry with her that he went to spend the night at a friend’s house without permission. That’s how he put it. Her version of that was, he ran away. As we got deeper into that issue, I learned that he had also had a nearly physical confrontation with her new boyfriend, who was living with them. And I noticed, as he was talking about that, his cheek was twitching as he courageously tried to contain all his sadness and rage. He didn’t want to let that out in front of his mother. So I suggested that I meet with each of them for a few sessions individually so I could learn more about their different perspectives. (See, that’s safe, right?) Everybody’s got one. And then we could get back together again to start resolving the differences. He’s going to have an opportunity, then, to express how he really feels without the fear of arousing his mother’s anger or hurting her feelings. And I think, probably, both of those were an issue for him.

So that’s a safe outlet for him – to talk to somebody that is going to try to help him solve the problem. She’s going to have a chance to express her frustration with working with her first teenage son. They don’t come with a manual. It’s really tough to figure out what to do.

The principle there is that, when children have an appropriate outlet for strong feelings, they learn to feel the full range of their emotions, and then to deal with them in mentally healthy ways. And that’s what I’m going to do with this young guy. I’m going to help him learn how to *feel* things and then put those feelings into words that his mother can hear, so that they can talk about things.

Another thing to think about is a *time to cool down*. When children are angry or anxious or embarrassed, it’s probably best not to immediately confront their feelings. We need to spend some time drawing close to them. Of course, when we see our child crying, or really upset, or really embarrassed or discouraged, we’re tempted to want to know what’s going on so we can fix it. So we begin that great communication-killing model – interrogate, judge, fix. We just get right in there, get in their face, ask a lot of questions – try to *pull* it out of them – “Open up!” That just doesn’t work!

Sometimes kids come in my office all upset. They'll bury their face in a pillow, and they'll cry, and they won't talk. And I'll just say, "I can see that you're really upset and I'm just going to *be* here with you until you feel better. In here, it's always okay to feel bad." And usually, after a few minutes of cooling, then they begin to talk about what's upset them. So that's really important – really important – to kind of let things cool off.

You know, if you go completely into to low-mode functioning – that's where your cortex is completely shut off and all you've got is emotions – sometimes it can take as much as thirty-six hours to get your cool back. Children are really afraid of their feelings most of the time, so we really need to have cooling down time if they're really, really upset. But I've noticed that, if I let them know that I'm just going to be there with them and kind of contain those feelings, that encourages them to kind of come out of that and start talking.

*Atuning* to feelings. Years ago, when I was working at a public school, two boys were brought to me by a duty teacher at recess. And they'd been behind the gym, where the duties couldn't see them, and they were having a fist fight. Maybe fist fight is too strong a term – they were having a fight. I don't know if third graders have fist fights. Usually, it's wrestling matches. Both of them were third graders and both of them were pretty good kids. I knew both of them – never gotten in any trouble. So the duty left, and I'm standing there, and they're both standing there looking up at me, side by side – not an ounce of animosity remained. All their focus was on "What's going to happen now?" Neither one of them was hurt – no blood was drawn. Nobody had a black eye, no scratches, bite marks. This is all good. So I said to them – this is my way of atuning to what they're going through, right? – I said, "I remember a fight I got into when I was your age. It was with a kid that I usually played with" – and I called his name, so they knew that I remembered his name – "and it was my first fight. And I did it because I wanted to know if I was brave enough to fight." And I said, "Is this you guys' first fight?" And of course, I know that this doesn't mean, necessarily, that this was true, but they said, "Yeah." I said, "Okay, so I get it. You are both brave enough to stand up for yourselves, and that's a really good thing." I said, "*But* there is something that you need to know. The duty teacher happens to be a woman. And they don't *get* boys fighting. They don't! They think it's terrible. And there are *rules* about that. So, if you do that again, they're probably going to do something much worse to you. And, you know, you don't have to fight now, because you know you can. What do you want to do now?" And they said, "Can we go back to recess?" I said, "Okay, have fun." Never saw them again. No problems. No trouble.

So I painted a picture with a story from my past to let them know that I *understood* their motives and that I was on the same page with them. A woman can't do that so much, because they don't do that. It's mysterious and terrible – why boys fight. So, when we can do that, it helps them feel understood. Now, there are things that women can tell girls that I couldn't, because I don't get it. So I'm not saying that men are superior. I'm just saying we're different. Does anybody disagree with that? No, we *are* different, aren't we? What do you know – as much as some people hate to admit it.

Also, it's really interesting that both of those boys started coming to me when they had problems or questions. Neither of them got in trouble anymore. I think that was because they believed that I would understand them – because of their experience with me. The next one.... One of my clients, in the past, lived with his mother for part of the week, and he lived with his father part of the week. By the way, this point is *emotional distance* – to get emotional distance from situations. When he's at his father's house, his mother is always calling him to see if he is okay. The unstated message is, "You're in danger there." And it's too bad, because she also tells him that. She regularly tells him that he's not safe at his father's house, because his father is a flaming lunatic – when, actually, *she* is. Once she even called the police and said that she had reason to believe her son was being abused "as we speak." So, when the police showed up at the house, it was dark, and everybody was asleep. So the father got up, went to the door. The police wanted to leave, because they realized everything was okay, but he made them come in and see that his son was all right. So that's kind of the history behind this situation.

Well, one time, the father saw the boy talking to his mother at his house, repeatedly telling her, "No, I'm okay. Everything is all right." So he knew this was happening again, as usual. But it was getting late and it was time for bed, so he wrote a note that his son could read – held it up while his son was talking on the phone – and it said, "Why don't you tell your mother that you need to let me put your handcuffs back on so you can go to bed now?" The boy read the note and burst out laughing – so hard that it took several minutes for him to regain his composure. Then, when he did, he told his mother he needed to go to bed now and his dad was waiting with the handcuffs. Then he broke out in laughter all over again and hung up.

So that emotional distance that he was able to create with humor helped him feel better about that stressful situation. Since I work with him and his father, he tells me that when he starts to feel hassled, he just remembers the handcuffs, and no big deal. We've all heard the story about how to deal with people who hassle us. We just think of them in their underwear. Right?

So those are some ways to create some emotional distance from the situation. Kids really need that. Sometimes kids tell me they have a teacher that is really disrespectful to them. And I say, "Why don't you just think of them as having their name Mr. or Mrs. Meanie?" I mean, if they're being mean, why not? Right? I have very little tolerance for that.

So, the principle there is that when kids can distance themselves from strong anxiety, from strong anger, it's a sign that they have not been consumed by their feelings, which is fear that children have. A lot of the kids tell me that they're afraid to talk about their feelings because they're afraid they're going to get upset all over again and they'll still be upset when they leave. This is the way to help kids realize that they can have feelings without being consumed by them. It helps them know that they can feel their feelings without being engulfed and without losing control.

*Stress relief.* One time a boy told me about a test he was about to take. (This was when I was a school counselor, too.) He seemed to be really worried about it. He was afraid he

wasn't going to do well. After quizzing him a little bit, I found out that he had been studying, but he was one of these anxious, type-A kind of kids, that wants to perform well all the time. So I asked him if he had a pet rock, or a picture, or a favorite shirt that felt really good. He had a polished agate that felt cool and smooth, he told me. I said, "How big is it?" He said, "Oh, about that big." I said, "Well, why don't you bring it to school with you on the day of the test, and just put it up on your desk?" I said, "Will the teacher let you do that?" He said, "Yeah, I think she will." I said, "Just put that up on your desk, and if you start to feel a little anxious, just get ahold of that, and put it your hand, and rub it around, and feel how good it feels, and put it back and do a question. Then pick it up and feel it, and then do another one." He reported feeling much better after that.

Kids don't know, a lot of times, how to relieve stress. And sometimes there is a tactile element to that that they can do. So something to hold is very helpful.

I remember an incident where I had a middle-schooler who got suspended from school. She got put on probation. She had to go meet her parole officer – or probation officer. Whatever she did at school caused some of her friends to rail on her on MySpace. She was really quite upset about it – got a week off. I suggested to her mother that, since she was off school, she might come in for another session that week. So when she came in, we talked all about her fears of becoming a loser for the rest of her life and what the other kids would say when she came back to school. Toward the end of the session I asked her if... You always try to end the session on a positive note. Right? You sandwich the bad stuff in the middle between the introductory stuff and the good stuff at the end. I asked her if anything good came from her experience. Of course, I was hoping to learn about what she had learned from the experience. Somehow those things change us, right? We learn to not do what we did, or say what we said or whatever. She said, "I got to see you twice in one week." And then she gave me a hug and thanked me for being her friend.

So just being able to come in and talk to her friend, who wasn't going to give her a bad time like everybody else, was a stress reliever. Of course, I wasn't thinking about it like that. But that's what it felt like to her.

So the principle there is that children don't often know *how* to relieve their stress, so helping them do that helps build a connection. "Thank you for being my friend no matter what I do." It's so important.

That brings us to the very next point, which is to *accept the undesirable*. Children with a low sense of themselves try to prove that they are unacceptable. And they do that because they're afraid that they're always going to be judged down, and left out, and unloved. So they try to break the relationship so that they don't have to feel disappointed when you walk away from them, because they believe that's what you're going to do. It is very deeply imbedded in attachment theory – that practicing approach-avoidance behavior. They try to prove that they are unacceptable to you.

I've talked about this client before. The first time she came in she was very subdued. And her mother was present. But then the next week – I think she was in the third grade – she chewed up a paper napkin and spit it through a straw at my windows. She messed all the toys up. She didn't break anything. She didn't say any bad words. She didn't hit me. She kept all the rules for my office, which is you can do anything you want, as long as nobody gets hurt and nothing gets broken. But she did everything else! I just said to her at the end of the session, "It looks to me like you're trying really to see if I really am serious about taking care of you. So I just want you to know that I'm not going to give up on you. You can just be as onery as you want to be in here and that's okay." So the next week she came in and she was *much* nicer. She had her set spells or episodes after that. It was all about her believing that I wasn't going to *not* give up on her. That was her therapy, really.

I had another client who was convicted of a crime against a child – his daughter. He steadfastly claimed that he didn't do it. He had a very reasonable, plausible story to prove it. The court had placed his daughter with the one he claimed had perpetrated the act against his daughter. Go figure that. So he was very anxious, very depressed, very angry, very fearful, not sleeping. Other things – the depression, the not sleeping, the paranoia that he experienced, the negativeness – that all was there before all this came up, because of his background. He had a terrible, terrible childhood. The psyhe eval that came from CYFD – Children, Youth and Family – that's New Mexico for Child Protective Services – said that he was in a state of arrested development. He was very immature for his thirty years of age.

So I talked to him as though he was a child. And I said, "I don't know what you did or what you didn't do. And, in a way, I kind of don't care about that. And I'm not going to make that my business. I *do* know that you had a terrible childhood, and that because of what's happened to your family, you are suffering serious depression and anxiety. And I know I can help you with those things. But it's going to be hard work for you. And I don't know if you're willing to do that hard work, but I can promise you that I won't give up on you." He broke down and cried. His experience all his life has been one of judgment and rejection. So I was talking right to the hurt. I was hoping, at that point, that he would take the courage and do the work.

So the principle there is accepting the undesirable in children helps them face the undesirable in themselves. If you defuse it – you defuse the fear by accepting them the way they are – it's amazing how it comes back around to that in the end.

The next point...I'll just call this *enlarging the circle*. Every now and then, I meet parents who believe they are all their children need to develop normally. I have to say that they do that under the guise of providing safety for their kids, when they're really working on their own control issues most of the time. It's scary for some people to think that their kids are going to develop relationships with other adults. All kids need peer relationships. But a child cannot learn to be an adult from kids. They learn to be adults from other adults. And they need more than just their parents to do that.

In a tribal society, or non-Western culture – there is a whole big extended family of relatives and friends to do that. I remember years ago – about thirty years ago – I went to a child care convention in Houston, and the governor of New Mexico, Jerry Apodaca, gave the keynote speech. He talked about how, when he was a kid growing up in the south valley, he couldn't get away with anything, because there was always a cousin, or an uncle, or a grandparent, or somebody that knew him that was watching what he was doing. That is a very healthy environment for children. And children *need* to watch and learn from all kinds of adults. They need relationships with other adults *besides* their own parents.

When there's a strong breach between parent and child – we never have those kinds of things in our family, do we? – they can benefit and need another adult to help them, if the adult knows what to do. Good use of therapy.

Going back to the boy and his mother, who came together. She sensed that he needed help talking to her. I have to hand it to her, because most parents that come with kids – especially teenagers – they think the problem is with the child and they want you to fix their kid. But she said, "*We* are having a problem." So she knew that something wasn't right on *her* side of the equation, as well. So she wanted to come in and work through it. I mentioned in our first session that she could expect to have to make some changes, because it isn't always just the child. But she knew and she was willing to do that. So my role there is going to be to mediate and soften the talk so that they can find solutions, teach them how to listen to each other without creating defensiveness, and to coach them in how to approach each other and to learn what the other one needs. Very important for that to happen.

So a child's sense of self can be eroded if they confront adults with whom they are in values conflict, parents included. You wouldn't want to send an elementary-aged child to deal with a problematic teacher. They would be overpowered. Even middle-schoolers, sometimes, have problems with that. You probably *would* want to send a high-schooler to do that, in most cases, with coaching, because they have enough sense of self at that age to be able to do that. If they get disrespectful or show weakness, then they'll learn from that situation – that what they did, didn't work. A small child – you need to go to bat for them and advocate for your child in those situations.

So, as we deal realistically with the feelings that are a part of our children, it draws us closer to them. It helps them know that we understand, value and love them.

I had a very interesting experience recently. I was talking to a friend who is in a severe trial. And she lives a long way from us. When somebody is a long way from you and you know they're in a severe trial, I always feel extra helpless. You can't even hug them. You can just talk to them, and you can't even see them. So I told her that I kept my phone on 24/7, and always within an arm's reach, and if she needed to talk to me at any time, I would pick up – with the caveat that, if she called at 3 am, it might take me a few minutes to become coherent. Well, later she told me that that helped her *so* much that she took that comment to God and asked God if He was always within an arm's reach, as well. Of

course, to me, that felt kind of backwards, because the challenge for me is, “Can I be the way God is?” – not is God like me, but can I be like God? But that really isn’t the point. The point is that all of us, when we encounter care and love from other human beings – especially if we’re children and it comes from parents – it helps us have faith that God loves us in that same way. Right? I mean, that’s Bible and that’s fundamental psychology, as well.

So when we’re told in Ephesians that we bring our children up in the nurture of the Lord – that’s King James language – and not to discourage them about God, we need to have a bag of approaches to apply to be sure that we know how to nurture our children into a relationship with God.

Enough sermons about philosophizing, and fantasizing, and being doctrinal and all that. But a presentation that is all together a giant “need step” – an action step – showing us how to exactly do that. And that’s what this whole series is about. It’s all about specific things you can do to help your children feel closer to *you* and to know that you love *them*. And as you do that, it not only rockets their development forward, it also lays a foundation for faith in God as they get older and can think in more sophisticated terms about the spiritual aspects of life.

So think about the thing that you can do and how it’s more important to do one of these things than it is to sit and listen to ten sermons that don’t actually teach you anything about what you can do to live a better Christian life.