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Presentation Transcript
Practical Parenting – Communicating Love To Children
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January 22, 2015

Bill here for LifeResource Ministries.

We're continuing our series on *Practical Parenting*. This is the second one. The title is *Communicating Love To Children*.

Let me tell you about my experience as a child and family counselor. In my practice, it's quite common for parents to bring children who have a problem. "He can't control his anger," "His grades are going down," "He keeps bullying his brother," "He's totally non-cooperative," "He's skipping school," or "He doesn't want to go to school," "He gets up too late to go to school," etc. They know something's up, but they don't know what's causing it and they don't know what to do about it. They say things like, "We've tried everything and nothing works." When parents bring a child with a problem, they're usually very worried, because they love their kids, and the unspoken request is, "Fix my child." So here's what I tell them. I tell them, "Let me get to know your child for a while and see if I can figure this out. When I think I know what's going on, I'll ask you to come in with your child and we'll all work to create a plan." And then I say to the parents, "If I should discover that there are things that you are inadvertently doing to contribute to the problem, or there are things you could do to help with the problem, I would expect that you'd be willing to do that work." They almost always agree wholeheartedly to include themselves, if necessary, because the vast majority of parents want to do the best job they can with their children, because they love them.

So the work begins. I start getting to know the child. The child knows their job is to help me get to know them. They're usually quite cooperative. And most of the time, they want to get fixed, too, so to speak. They think they're defective or there's something wrong with them. They bring their important stuff in. They draw pictures or play music. They tell me all about their interests, their life at school, their life at home. And with just a bit of prompting, they tell me all about their problems from *their* perspective. And who can guess

what I learn 90% of the time? That's right. There's nothing wrong with the child. They're just reacting normally to the way they're being treated at school or at home. Think about it.

Who sets the tone in the home? Parents or kids? Children don't set the tone. They're just reactors. They react to the environment. They don't create it. There are all kinds of things parents do, without realizing it, to cause problems with the tone in their home. They might favor one child over another without realizing it. They might play video games instead of playing with their kids. They might work way too much. They might be too strict or too lenient. They might be inconsistent or unfair in their discipline. Maybe they're illogical in boundary setting, or they're too distracted to hold the boundaries. Maybe they fight in front of their kids. See, all of these things are tone-setters, but none of them is the most common thing some parents don't do well. Would anyone care to offer a guess as to what the most common root cause of problems with children who come into my practice is? The most common reason children have problems at home and at school? Right. It's a relationship problem with their parents. Let's look at one of the most important scriptures in the Bible. This is like a light bulb going on for us. Jesus said, in John 12:32:

John 12:32 – *When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.*

Why? Well, God has created us to be relational like He is. We were created to respond to God's love. God uses our natural inclination to love and be loved as a handle to draw us to Himself. Jesus' great sacrificial act gets our attention because it means He loves us and we go toward that naturally. Children are the same way. They have a handle, too. They're hard-wired to love and be loved by parents. And that's not just Bill talking. We've proven that in brain research over and over again. Children are hard-wired to love and be loved by parents. They know where it happens in the brain. And when we love them, they move our direction naturally and easily. When the tone is loving and respectful, they tend to be cooperative. Most of us know this, but there is something that can get in the way.

Many people in Western culture no longer know how to express love to children. You see, it's different than with an adult. Guys, when you wanted your wife to marry you in the beginning, what did you buy her? Well, you bought her as big a ring as you could afford. And what did that say to her? Well, it said to her that you loved her. She *knew* you loved her because there's the proof of it. That doesn't work with children. Buying them things and taking them places does not communicate love to children or even teenagers. The things that work with adults don't work with kids. So what do we do?

Well, I'm going to tell you a story. I once moved to a new church to pastor there. And I noticed that after church, the teens were gathered in small groups around the outside of the meeting room. In my first month, I never saw an adult speak to a teen. I told my wife, "These young people don't feel a part of this group. They feel invisible."

By the way, the last time you were in a group of people, how many teens did you walk by without acknowledging their presence? It's what we do in Western culture. We assume they have their own music, their own friends, their own clothes, their own society and we're not a part of it. Well, do you know why they have that? We forced them to do that, because we've excluded them from our world. Every adult is responsible to set an example for every child wherever you go. Do we know what awaits those who don't? Yeah, it's the millstone, right?

Back to the story... a year later, after I'd given a sermon about our youth group, nearly every teen in the room was around me afterwards, wanting to talk about the sermon and to be hugged. How did that happen? Well, I applied four ridiculously simple principles every time I encountered a teenager. It didn't cost me any money and very little time – for those of you who worry about things like that.

Okay, here they come – the four principles – the practical, rubber-meets-the-road things you can do to show kids you love them:

You have to have developmentally appropriate boundaries. I had a nineteen-year-old tell me once that her little brother was born with cerebral palsy. Her parents had to spend all their time with him. She told me that she would deliberately do things, when she was a little girl, to draw some attention – you know, disobedience and such – but it didn't work. She could get away with anything, because her parents were too involved with her brother. Her comment was, "I wasn't even worth spanking." Every child hates boundaries. Every child knows the application of boundaries to them, by loving parents, is an act of love. It's kind of a paradox really. Now, we said, "Developmentally appropriate," right? If you don't know much about child development, you won't be able to do this well, so your boundaries are going to be too restrictive or not challenging enough to promote growth or keep the child safe. So, if you're not willing to sacrifice yourself to the task of boundary holding and you don't know what boundaries to set, you won't be able to do this, because it takes a lot of time and effort. Are your kids worth it? But maybe you spend all your time working, so you can buy your kids stuff. That's not what they need. I mean, they do need things, and money is a great advantage in parenting, but without the undergirding loving relationship, all that's stuff is going to be wasted effort in the long run. If you don't spend time with your kids, and you don't apply the boundaries, and spend time holding those boundaries, your child will believe in their bones that you don't care about this. They think, "Who wants to cooperate with those people who don't care about us?" I don't.

Here's the second one now – *focused positive, non-judgmental attention.* My son-in-law owns a service business. We were talking about what his business was like, and he said, "My customers drive me crazy. They all want a piece of me. They think they own me." Well, our kids all want and need a piece of us – a lot more than we think, maybe. And, if they don't get it, they will believe that we don't love them, no matter how many times we might say it. See, they don't listen so much to what we say as they watch what we do.

There's a boy – he's eighteen – who is coming to see me – a really neat guy – artist, athlete, kind-hearted, multifaceted. And his father works so much he rarely sees his son. Every time I ask the boy if he's done anything fun with his dad lately, he just sighs and looks sad.

Let's talk about being non-judgmental for a minute. We don't have to agree with our kids' choices or tastes to be positive. If they happen to like music that we hate, we can ask them to explain it to us, and be interested, and try to understand it. And, instead of making fun of them over it, or telling them we hate it, we can, by way of contributing to the conversation, just tell them what we like. I mean, they're telling us, right? It's called being polite – carrying on a conversation. You don't have to put down everything you hear.

I had a girl walk up to me at a dance once, and she asked me if I liked her dress. Now there I was – I was the pastor...why would she ask me if I liked her dress? Well, I said, "Lovely, as always." She knew I was talking about her rather than her dress, so she cut right to it. "Is it long enough?" Now, how did that happen? Who asks their minister if they're dressed appropriately? But this girl, along with a lot of other young people in that group, knew that I cared about them and that I was on their side. She felt safe. She knew that if I told her dress was too long...she wanted to please me – that's why she was asking me the question. So church was a safe place for her and I was safe for her. Even if she heard bad news, she knew that I still cared about her. So, that all came from these four principles applied to other people's kids. I didn't mandate their respect. I drew them into it.

Point number three – *positive intermittent eye contact*. When a mother or father picks up the crying baby, and then changes its diaper or feeds it, there is intermittent eye contact. Social scientists and brain scanners are learning that this kind of positive eye contact helps the infant feel taken in, understood, cared for and loved as much as any other thing parents do. We're learning that *this* is what gives a baby a sense of security and courage to face life.

When I would give a sermon in that church – all those years ago now – I would try to make individual eye contact with each child in the room, as well as the adults – talk to them a bit. It said, "I see you. I know you're listening. I'm thinking about you while I'm talking." A teen asked me once, "Why can I understand your sermons?" And I said, "Well, that's because I'm the world's greatest public speaker!" She rolled her eyes, laughed, and said, "Yeah, right." And I said, "It's because of our relationship. You know that I'm interested in you and that makes you interested in me. It's mutual." See, it wasn't a chore for her to listen to one of my sermons. She was interested because of the relationship – because of the love. Unremitting eye contact is staring. Intermittent eye contact conveys love. Okay? I told you they were ridiculously simple, but they're very powerful.

Here's the last one: *developmentally appropriate physical touch*. When I first moved to that congregation, the teens would walk by me like I was invisible. Of course, they were

just taking their cues from all the adults who treated them all their lives at church. So I made it a point to look each one in the eye briefly, smile, and then call them by name if I knew their name. If I was talking to an adult when they went by, I couldn't call their name very well and be polite, so as they passed, I'd pat them on the arm or shoulder. If it was a guy, I'd chuck them a bit, or hold up my hand and high-five as they went by. At first, they didn't know what to do with it – you know, “A minister who actually noticed me. How weird!” But in the end, all those social touches and eye contact and attention fostered relationship.

Do you touch your children lovingly? I hope so. I know some of us have a problem touching anybody or making eye contact. I go back to the quote – I forget who said it now, but it ran like this: “Do not think that God gave us children for us to mature, but rather know that He gave us children to mature us.” You know, if we can't make eye contact, or we can't touch, or we can't be positive, or we can't hold a boundary, change! Learn how to do it. It's not that hard.

So there you have them – four ridiculously simple concrete things to do to create love and respect with our children. Once the relationship is solid, parenting goes more smoothly. Rules *without* relationship equals rebellion. Rules *with* relationship equals respect.

We already love our children. Why is it so hard for us to express love to them in a way that they can take it in? For some of us, these are just natural ways, because we were parented that way, but for others, there's something that needs to be learned, because we never were treated that way. Some of us did not enjoy the necessity of parental love expressed as children, so we have to find our way into God's love as He loves us. And we have to heal from our own heart wound, so that we can extend love to other people.

Most of my practice is about helping people get over the hurts their inadvertently inflicted on them. Most of the people who come want to get over their wounds, because they realize their wounds are affecting their kids in a negative way. Besides all the obvious things, like prayer, study, meditation, fasting, going to church, tithing, volunteering and evangelizing, we need to also do the inner work – the work of the heart. We can heal from the hurts that cause us to wall off our own children. If you need help with that, I can help you find the help you need where you live. Give me a call. Send me an email. I'll help you.

Okay. We publish every two weeks, so be sure to tune in two weeks from now for the next one in our series on *Practical Parenting*. It's about parental example – what kind of tone you set in your home. Don't miss it.