

How to Raise Your Children Without Throwing Out Your Marriage

Whether your children are small, in school, teenagers, just stepping out on their own, or have established their own homes, they have a profound effect on you and your spouse as well as your relationship.

Do you **remember** when you were a late teenager or young adult? There were some underlying assumptions as to your future, because you live in the general culture of the United States.

That **assumption** included that when you finished basic schooling, whether high school or college or specialized training, you would get a **job** that would provide you with enough money to do what you needed and wanted to do for the rest of your life. You would be able to buy the **house** you wanted, the **cars** you wanted, the **entertainment** you wanted, and one day **retire** (maybe when you reached 50) being able to **travel** the world or at least do **whatever** it is you wanted to do every day. Included in that assumption was that you would have a husband or wife and the perfect number of children. Your children would be healthy and normal and grow up even better than you did because they just would. You knew there would be a **few glitches** along the way, but nothing that you couldn't handle because as a teenager you believed you could do anything and the results of what you did would be better than your parents or your brother and sister or your Uncle Joe and Aunt Mary or the neighbors or

For many that is the way your adult life is unfolding. For others, it hasn't turned out that way. Perhaps for you... you had the baby and **weren't yet married**... or you married mostly because the **baby was on the way**... or you weren't able to have children and eventually **adopted**... or you went through the incredible trauma of **in vitro** fertilization to get pregnant... or you had an **abortion** because it just wasn't a good time to have a baby... or your baby was **born with physical or mental deficiencies**... or you got married and then after the baby came you found out that your **spouse really didn't want** to have children or was **abusive**... Perhaps your child **died** or your spouse died or divorced you and you either had children to raise mostly on your own or you remarried and ended up helping to raise somebody else's children.

Depressing, isn't it? But true! It isn't a fantasy. Even if you basically have followed the pattern of finishing school, getting married, having some kids, and are now raising them, you both brought some **baggage** into your marriage that **affects how you relate** to one another and to your children.

It doesn't really matter what you brought into your marriage, what has come up in it or what problems your children have brought to you – whether your biological children or someone else's with whom you are in relationship. The premise is this: **Perhaps the most important thing you can do for your children and your relationship is to decide these 2 things:**

What is your purpose in your children's lives and what is their purpose in yours?

Recently I have been working on sorting through some **genealogy** files that my mother accumulated over a period of about 15 years. Something very noticeable is that in the 1700's and 1800's and even early 1900's, couples had **many children** in order to have help to do the labor necessary **to survive**. Often as many as half of their children **died** either shortly after birth or before they reached the age of 5. So, they had to keep having more. That is not true today because we **do not live in an agrarian society**. In fact, having 1-3 seems to be preferable because of the cost of raising them.

So, **your purpose is different than** that of at least your grandparents and the generations before them. Your parents may have subscribed to the '**nuclear family**' concept of having 2 children to replace them when they die. The **title of teenager** did not exist until the mid-1950's. So, it is **different for you** than it was for your parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles.

Let's look at some **basic needs of and truths** about children at various stages. First, we know that we all need **food, clothing, and shelter**. I assume that you would agree it is **your job to provide** those for your child until he or she is no longer living in your home.

Human beings have **3 emotional needs: safety, security, and significance**.

It is on that premise that we will consider basic needs and truths about children.

Infant – To the newborn these needs are met by the way in which they have their physical needs met.

Safety comes from having the physical needs met.

Security comes in the consistency of those needs being met.

Significance comes from the touch, the attention that is given in the process of meeting the physical needs.

Toddler and Preschooler – To this age child,

Safety comes when you simply **run interference** when the situation is unsafe. You pick him up and move him before he gets into something dangerous. You don't give him food or toys that will harm him.

Security comes in **learning, experiencing, and knowing** that no matter that you stepped out of the room or left the house, you will be back. The Preschooler and early elementary aged child has a fantasy world. When you participate sometimes in that fantasy world – at invitation of course – and also demonstrate that reality is a good place to be, you provide security. This fantasy world, by the way, is very important. It helps set the stage for them to believe in what they cannot see – in other words, to have **faith**.

Significance comes from **seeing your face** light up whenever you see her, when you play the same game over and over and over with him, when you tell her that you love her, when you believe that he can do that next developmental task – walking or talking or not going potty in his pants or giving up his bottle or pacifier.

Elementary Age Child – Your child at this age sees everything as true or false; he is described as a concrete thinker. And **truth is based on his/her perception**. If you say that you will play ball with him after supper and something comes up you have to do so that you can't, he believes that you **lied** to him. If you tell her that if she picks up all her toys, she can watch a video, and then because it takes her too long in your mind and she has to go to bed anyway, you are not being fair to her...she did what you said, and now you lied. You are mean. And, it's true. Does that mean you can't ever change your mind or have something come up? Of course not!

Safety comes from **the limits you set** as to which videos, which toys, which foods, which friends, which behaviors, which activities your child experiences.

Security comes from **learning, experiencing, and believing** that although you may on a rare occasion have to ‘renig’ on a promise (and everything you tell them or imply they might be able to do is a promise you made) usually you follow through on what you have said you will do. You follow through whether it is in a statement about playing with them or a discipline you impose. Consistency and integrity are the millstones of security for your child. This is how he or she knows your heart; they **must experience** it.

Significance comes at this age when you believe in and **show that you believe** in his ability to be a musician or an artist or an athlete or a student or a friend or your child. Notice I didn’t say his ability to be an outstanding musician or artist or athlete or student or friend or child but rather to be one. And attending the events and activities within the areas in which you are affirming her ability to be gives your child significance.

CAUTION! This is the age of exploration and there are **many areas** in which your child can explore his or her interest and ability. The healthiest thing you can do for your child is to have him or her involved in only one area outside of school and church. And, when that area is started, it has to be completed. If she does dance this year and piano next year and soccer the next year, it is okay. If he can’t make up his mind what he wants to pursue forever, does it really make a difference when he is in elementary school? If he really balks at continuing something, is there a chance that his significance to you is based on his performance in that activity? Be honest with yourself and with each other. If your wife or husband tells you that you may expect too much or yell at him too much or criticize her too much, **stop**. If need be, **get a second opinion** from someone who has seen you in action and will tell you the truth. Don’t assume it is just because you think your spouse is too easy on your child.

Early adolescent – This age is really an **anomaly!** It has only surfaced with real attention as something different than a child but not quite yet a teenager in the last couple of decades. This is the age when many parents say, “Who are you and what did you do with my darling son or sweet daughter? We seem to have a monster in our house – who just last week was easily lovable!” I can see by your smiles that some of you have

experienced or are experiencing that right now. The early adolescent – the middle high student – has no clue about his or her life and is basically terrified of what's out there. Sometimes you may see it, but most of the time he acts more like a surly, cocky, sarcastic delinquent. It is during this age that children begin to be less concrete, less that everything is true or false, and become a little abstract. When you tell an 8-yr-old who says you aren't fair that life isn't fair, you might as well state that in 30 seconds your head will expel from your body, twirl around, roll down the street, and then trade places with someone else's head. Sometimes when you tell a 12-yr-old that life isn't fair there might be some recognition. That does not mean she will tell you she understands, of course.

Safety to the early adolescent still comes from the **limits you set**, but with more **flexibility and more choices** on his or her part. For example, rather than saying to your child that when he gets home from school he is to have a snack, do his chores, and then his homework and no TV, you might tell him that by the time you get home or dinner is ready he is to have completed his chores and be done with most or all of his homework depending on whether or not he will be able after dinner to do it. There is some choice. If it is not done, then there needs to be a consequence. More and more your child may want to do things with people, especially friends, other than you. Safety is allowing that to happen but telling your child that if he or she is ever in a situation that isn't comfortable or she knows is inappropriate or will not meet with your values that you have already talked about over the years to call you immediately and you will come to get her. Safety comes from knowing you will come.

Security comes from **learning, experiencing, and believing** that you will come but will not spend time **going on and on** about the evils of what he just walked away from. It is letting her tell you about how she felt and why she decided to leave and letting it be just that. Share your emotions about it with your spouse or a friend not your child.

Significance is when you let him know by your touch, by your words, by your facial and body expressions that you know he will always make good choices in those kind of settings. When you believe in your child's ability to use good judgment (not adult evaluation) and affirm that to him or her, you provide the foundation for doing just that.

The Teenager – **What fun** your teenager can be! She might even like sitting around and talking about her friends and her life with you. He might like discussing how he is able to get that engine working. Or, she might get mad and storm out of the house or into her room, giving you a dirty look. He might only respond with ‘Nothin’ when you ask what he is doing or how school went.

Safety for the teen is to be **able to step out and take some risks**, knowing that if the job doesn’t work, she’ll still have food to eat... that if he doesn’t do well in the speech meet, he’ll still have a bed to sleep in and clothes to wear.

Security is in **knowing and learning and experiencing** that even if he had a success that didn’t work (that is another term for failure), if someone said something critical or hurtful to her that not only will there still be the food, clothing, and shelter, but that you will love him or her no less because the world crashed in. In fact, you will support his or her feelings and allow them to happen. If his girlfriend has broken up with him, you will allow him to be a little more non-communicative at the table or even a bit rude. You will remember the pain of rejection, of failure, of exhaustion, of fear and you will allow your teen to experience them in the safety of their relationship with you.

Significance will come when you **don’t always try to step in** and solve her problems for her, when you let him fail and deal with the consequences....when you say with your words, feel with your touch, and share with your facial and body expressions that you know he or she can figure this out, can get past it, can be better for it, can do it. When you try to solve or figure out his/her problems, you give the message that you think he or she is incapable of doing it. You will begin talking to him or her as you would an adult regardless of his or her actions. And you will aim your relationship toward his full independence from you. These things give your teen significance.

The adult child – If you have established a rapport with your adult child and you see that becoming his or her own person is a healthy development (which it is), you will now sit back and relax a bit.

The safety that you have provided is now up to your adult child to provide. The only thing you can provide here is your prayer that God will keep him or her safe. You

might be able to offer some financial startup; but be sure that it is wanted. Your teen has already been preparing to be on his or her own, to be independent of you.

Security is having **learned, experienced, and believed** that you will be there to encourage, to listen, to care about, to advise if requested, to provide small tokens in time of need, but most of all that you will NOT take care of him or her.

Significance continues to flow from the years of childhood and teenage in which your adult child knows that you believe he or she will be a successful adult capable of providing his or her own safety, security, and significance and do that for his own spouse and children.

What is your purpose in your children's lives and what is their purpose in yours?

We've talked about **what they need** from you in this relationship. What do **you need** from them? If we take our **heavenly Father** as our example, from the book of Genesis in the Bible we know that God created man because he desired to be in relationship. He has created each of **us for relationship** with Him. He knew us when we were in our mothers' wombs. He **allows us to grow**, to make **choices** that provide for our physical safety; but **never to be totally independent of Him relationally**. He desires rather a relationship in which we are **not always asking Him to provide** for our physical needs but rather for the **guidance and wisdom** – rather knowing that He will... We want to be in an ongoing relationship with Him throughout the day, so that when we seek His face or ask Him what we should do, He is there to listen and give guidance. And, that is what you need from your children. **You need them to grow up in the safety of your physical provision, in the security of knowing absolutely and unequivocally that you love them and accept them just as they are and just as they are becoming, and in the significance of knowing that you believe in them, that your relationship will never be totally severed.**

So, you ask, if we are both doing these things for our children, does that mean our **marriage is foolproof**? No, of course not. But, if we offer the same things to our spouses that we offer our children, we will have a relationship that allows us to let go of our children when the time is right.

Let's consider the question,

What are you and your spouse's purposes in each other's lives?

God said that when you marry, the man and the wife are to become one. Jesus told us to love our neighbors as ourselves. If you are one, **how does your couple unit** experience each of the emotional needs? Safety? Security? Significance?

First comes the understanding that you are **not two different people** each providing those emotional needs for your children, but rather that you are **one unit**. Men and women are different so that they may **complement each other** as one unit. If you accidentally nick your finger with a kitchen knife, your back stiffens, your voice says, 'ouch,' your eyes water, and your feet head to the medicine cabinet. When your son makes his first home run, your legs suddenly put you in a standing position, your voice yells, your hands clap, ...and maybe your eyes water. Joy and pain are whole body experiences. The same is true in a marriage. When one hurts, the other is sad. When one is honored, the other is joyful. And, in your marriage both of you need safety, security, and significance. Do you remember the old saying that if you want a friend you have to be a friend? **Well, if you want safety, security, and significance, you have to give it – and give it to one another.** Much as is true in your relationship with your adult child, is whether or not your **spouse** is able to experience and take risks, having the **safety** of knowing that there will be a husband or wife to come home to who is sharing the pain and sharing the joy completely. Does your spouse feel **security** with you? Is she able to take a risk and know that you will support her, that you will encourage him, that you will laugh with her, that you will cry with him, that you will allow her to feel whatever she does and feel it with her? And, does your husband or wife know without a shadow of a doubt that you believe in his or her ability, his or her choices, his or her decisions, that is his or her significance to you? If you don't feel one with your spouse, then you may not be providing the emotional needs of safety, security, and significance.

Some practical things about being married with children:

- ❖ Be united in your ideas of discipline; decide ahead of time what they are
- ❖ Be consistent in carrying out whatever limits or discipline you do
- ❖ Back each other up even if it means you have to give in once in awhile
- ❖ If you are frustrated or angry with your spouse, do not put the kids in the middle
- ❖ Go on dates regularly – that means without the children (once a month at least)
- ❖ Be genuine; let your children see that affection in marriage is a good thing
- ❖ Give each other permission for accountability – and listen to it
- ❖ Model safety, security, and significance
- ❖ Strive to have a home in which there is mutually given the following:
 - Grace (patience)
 - Forgiveness (when asked for)
 - Accountability (expectations)
 - Respect (being happy with)