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### Managing Differences in the Family

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# MANAGING DIFFERENCES IN THE FAMILY

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BY ALINA M. BALTAZAR

## THE TEXTS

Genesis 1:27

I Corinthians 12:13

Colossians 3:11

Romans 12:16

Galatians 5:14

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This seminar aims to help the audience better understand differences within the family and how to manage any conflict that may arise from these differences, especially concerning modern societal issues. This seminar also addresses how to improve empathy and communication skills that may help resolve conflict related to these challenges.

## MATERIALS NEEDED

Laptop, projector or large Smart TV, PowerPoint software

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## DIFFERENCES IN THE FAMILY

Human beings are all different. Everyone was created in the image of God, so our differences reflect the beautiful dimensions of our creator. “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created him.” Genesis 1:27. People differ in many ways: personality, age, hair color, eye color, height, hair texture, gender, skin color, interests, abilities, sexual attraction, physical and mental health, limitations, body size/type, opinions, etc. Look around at your family and you will see several of these human variations. Many of these differences are biological, and some can be influenced by the environment and life experiences.

Our cultures often value some of these characteristics over others. In some cultures, certain body types are valued over others, whereas another culture could be the opposite in the type of body that is valued. As a result, some children may look down on others and other children internalize those lower opinions of themselves.

This can lead to conflict in the family. We may treat certain members of the family poorly due to their perceived lower value in society. Those who aren't treated well may act out or withdraw from the family all together, which can reinforce some of those low opinions of the other person.

One of the roles of parents is to talk about these differences to lessen the harm that can happen to a developing child's self-esteem and to improve empathy for those who are different from themselves. These conversations aren't always easy. It starts by developing a close relationship when our children are young. When there is a close relationship, kids feel like they can talk to their parents about difficult topics and know they won't feel judged (Baltazar, Dessie, & McBride, 2020)

Empathy is a great way to smooth over problematic differences in the family. In a sinful world, empathy does not develop naturally. Parents play a powerful role in children developing empathy. Harvard University (2023) has a Making Caring Common project that has shared the following tips to cultivate empathy in children.

1. **Empathize with your child and model empathy for others.** When a child experiences the benefits of empathy, they will want others to have those benefits as well. Once we empathize with our children, it helps them develop trust in others and have a more secure attachment with their parents. This can be done by being aware of our children's physical and emotional needs and understanding and respecting differences in themselves. If there is a closer attachment between parent and child, they are more likely to internalize the values they are taught. If there is closer attachment and we role model empathy towards others, children are more likely to emulate that behavior.
2. **Make caring for others a priority and set high ethical expectations.** Kids need to hear from their parents that caring for others is a top priority. Think about what Jesus teaches, “And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matthew 22:39,) which was originally an instruction from God to the new Israelite nation in Leviticus 19:18. This is a big part of the Christian faith.

3. **Provide opportunities for children to practice empathy.** God created us with an innate capacity for empathy, but like sharing, it needs to be nurtured and given opportunities to be practiced. When children complain about a peer or sibling, parents can help their child understand the other person's perspective and why they may have acted a certain way. A great way to develop empathy skills is to volunteer in the community, especially if they can work with a diverse group of people to address community problems.
4. **Expand your child's circle of concern.** It is easy to have empathy for our family and friends. Jesus challenged his followers to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." Luke 6:27. It begins with really listening to other people's stories. Origin stories are popular in modern entertainment. Every human has an origin to their behavior, good or bad. Many bullies were either bullied themselves or abused in their homes.
5. **Help children develop self-control and manage feelings effectively.** It is also important to keep in mind that what often blocks children from showing empathy towards others is their own negative emotions. It is hard to think of others when we are angry, ashamed, or envious. Helping children learn how to manage these emotions will release them to be able to have empathy towards others.
  - This begins by helping our children be aware of and identify problematic emotions. It helps to be cognizant of where and how we feel certain emotions in our bodies. It is easier to notice physical sensations before we are aware of strong emotions. For example, some feel anger as a burning in their stomach. When these sensations are noticed, it is time to activate coping tools to manage the emotion.
  - Another way to manage negative emotions is to slow our breathing down to increase calm. Generally, these exercises begin with breathing in through the nose slowly, holding our breath for a bit, and then breathing out even more slowly through our mouth, like breathing out through a straw. A way to remember this is to breathe in for four seconds, hold for six seconds, then breathe out for eight seconds. This may seem unnatural at first, so it helps to do it before a distressing situation, like during slightly stressful times throughout the day. Let's practice this exercise now.
  - A great breathing exercise for kids is "pizza breathing." Most kids love pizza and how it smells. So have your child pretend they are holding a piece of pizza in their hand and then breathe in the wonderful smells through their nose, but then pretend the pizza is too hot, so they need to blow on it to cool down. Let's practice this exercise now.

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Think back to when you were a teen. What was the best part about that time in your life?
- What were some of the challenges you faced during that time?

- Was there anything your parents did or said to you that was helpful during your teen years?
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## HOW TO TALK SO YOUR TEEN WILL LISTEN AND LISTEN SO YOUR TEEN WILL TALK

Adolescence can be a challenging time for many parents because this is a time when teens are working on developing their identity. They are deciding what parts of your teachings they will internalize, fitting them into their unique personality in a world different from the ones their parents grew up in.

This can lead to conflict between parents and teens when a teen starts to experiment with or take on an identity the parent(s) disagree with and are afraid it may lead to a path of destruction physically and/or spiritually. Though teens are increasingly turning to their peers and media for guidance, parents still play a powerful role. Parents often don't know how to approach their teen, who seems resistant to any guidance, or how to avoid a teen thinking they are being judged or disrespected.

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### DISCUSSION QUESTION

Let's explore ways we are almost guaranteed to turn most kids off. Get into a discussion group and think of some typical scenarios you have had with your kids and identify ways you have or think you would get a negative response.

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The authors of the well-known book *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* also wrote a book specific for parents of teens (Faber & Mazlich, 2005). These authors give guidance on six approaches that will help parents communicate better with teens.

1. **Deal with feelings.** Instead of dismissing feelings, acknowledge them. When a teen seems distressed, help them identify the thoughts behind those emotions and what emotions are being expressed at that moment. It is good to acknowledge those feelings and verbalize an understanding of why they may feel that way. You don't have to agree with them.
  - Try to correct any incorrect thoughts they may be having by asking questions to help them think it through on their own. Here is a technique from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to address incorrect thoughts without the other person getting defensive (Beck, 2011). In a situation where a teen thinks her friends "hate her," ask,
    - "Where did this idea come from (*the evidence*)?"
    - "Is there any evidence that your friends really do like you (*evidence against*)?"
    - "Is there an *alternative explanation* for your friend's behavior?"

- “*What if they really don’t like you, what can you do?*”
  - “*What would you say to a friend in this same situation?*”
  - Then try redirecting their attention to something else that could improve their mood.
2. **Getting a teenager’s cooperation.** Instead of ordering a teen to do or not do something, you can;
    - Describe the problem.
    - Share how you feel about the problem.
    - Give information as to why you believe it is a problem.
    - Offer a choice to decrease the possibility of butting heads.
    - Clearly state your beliefs and expectations so they better understand your perspective.
  3. **To punish or not to punish.** Grounding is a common way to punish a teenager, and sometimes that is appropriate if they are irresponsible with a privilege, they should lose that privilege for a specific period of time. When that doesn’t fit “the crime,” there can be other approaches to try.
    - The parent should begin by stating their feelings about the situation. This may appeal to the teen’s empathy they learned when young.
    - Clearly state expectations for their behavior and how their current behavior is not meeting those expectations.
    - Give them a choice on how they should make amends for the mistake.
  4. **Working it out together.** A parent may think a teen’s behavior is a problem that a teen doesn’t feel is an issue, such as a messy room. A good approach is to;
    - Invite your teen to give his/her point of view,
    - State your point of view
    - Invite your teenager to brainstorm with you to solve the problem by writing down all of the ideas,
    - Review the list and decide the best option you both can agree on.
  5. **Get to know your teen.** Try having a conversation with your teenager to better understand their perspective and what it is like being a teen these days. Some suggestions include (Faber & Mazlish, 2005, p. 118-122);
    - *What do you think is the best part of being your age either for you or your friends?*
    - *What are some of the things kids your age worry about?*
    - *Is there anything parents do that is helpful to teens?*
    - *Is there anything parents do or say that is unhelpful?*
    - *If you could give advice to parents, what would it be?*
    - *If you could give advice to other teenagers, what would it be?*
    - *What do you wish could be different about your life at home, in school, or with friends?*
  6. **Healthy expression.** It is important to express our concerns and appreciation towards our teens and for them to do that to us, but some ways may lead to better outcomes.
    - *When expressing concerns,* the teen or parents should say how they feel about the situation and then say what they would like/need and/or expect instead.

- *When expressing praise or appreciation*, describe what the person did and how that makes you feel.

## HOW TO TALK ABOUT DIFFICULT ISSUES

We may often think we have to choose a side that is the opposite of someone else. In reality, both sides may want the same thing, and they just have different ideas on how to get them. We have more in common than we realize. Generally, all humans want love, acceptance, safety, and freedom. As Christians, we want to show we love and care for others. Based on our culture and personal experience, we develop different ideas on how to get these desires met. When these differences lead to conflict in the family, it helps to really listen to the need or desire behind what the person is saying. Try to avoid taking offense at what is being said, be cordial instead.

There may be times when you genuinely believe the other person is wrong. It helps to state the facts, realizing they may disagree with the reliability of those facts. How many Christians question the reliability of evolutionary science? Citing Bible verses may not help either. Some Christians doubt the reliability of the Bible, thinking a book that old has changed so much from the original that it is no longer accurate, that it was only applicable to the culture of the time and place it was written, or those who wrote the Bible didn't understand enough about human behavior or the brain.

It helps to ask questions to understand the other person's perspective better. Doing so may help them see the error of their thinking without being embarrassed over their erroneous thinking. Remember what the Bible says, "Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion." Romans 12:16 We all have things we can learn from each other.

Look for what you do agree on and build from there. If you still sincerely believe the other person is in the wrong, but they refuse to see it, you don't need to end the relationship. For your own spiritual sake, you may have to distance yourself from the other person, though. Continue to pray for the other person and your relationship with them.

Resolving differences without hurting the other person's feelings can be challenging, thus damaging the relationship. As a result, we often avoid talking about problems, or we just don't express ourselves directly. There are ways to communicate our needs without making the other person defensive.

- *Aggressive communication* clearly states the issue but does so without regard to the other person's feelings. This can lead to defensiveness or resentment.
- *Passive communication* avoids conflict but can also lead to resentment when the distressed partner doesn't get their needs met.
- *Passive aggressive communication* is a combination of them, where one person lets the other person know something is wrong without clearly stating the actual issue. This can also lead to resentment in the passive-aggressive communicator when they aren't understood and

frustration by the receiving party since they often don't know what they did wrong or how to correct the problem.

- *Assertive communication* is the best way to approach discussing difficult family issues. As mentioned earlier, talking about feelings is a way to express ourselves without offending the other person since the issue is often not about the other person but about the person's feelings about the situation. Here is an example of an assertive communication script that may be challenging to follow at first but will become more natural with practice.
  - "I feel \_\_\_\_\_." First, we need to know what our feelings are. Psychologists vary on what our core emotions are, but generally, when we are upset about something, we are experiencing some variation of disgust, sadness, anger, or fear.
  - Do not say, "I feel that \_\_\_\_\_" That is an opinion, not a feeling. It can cause the person to get defensive, which can then escalate to conflict.
  - "About \_\_\_\_\_" Describe what you are concerned about without using the word "you" if possible. The other person isn't necessarily the problem, but the situation is.
  - "Because \_\_\_\_\_" Why is this situation causing you distress? How have childhood or past experiences led to your beliefs about the situation?
  - "I need \_\_\_\_\_" Clearly state what the other person can do to help you with the problematic situation. When you request assistance from the other person, it can lead to a more positive response. The other person may not be able to meet that need the way you are requesting, so then be willing to negotiate where both parties are more likely to get their needs met.

In a situation where a wife is upset at her husband for inviting friends over without checking in with her first, an assertive conversation will go like this; "I feel disregarded when friends are brought over without checking with me first because it reminds me when my parents wouldn't listen to me when I tried telling them I didn't want to do something. I need you to check in with me before you invite people over."

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### APPLICATION EXERCISE

Now practice assertive communication. Think of a regular point of conflict with a family member that you would like to improve your communication around. Either write down what you would say using the script presented or practice with the person you came with or someone else you'd feel comfortable with. The other person should try to take on the role of that other person, guessing how someone would react. Work on your negotiation skills. If you aren't comfortable talking about a personal issue, then choose a more generic point of conflict common within families.

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## WHAT TO DO WHEN CONFLICT ESCALATES

Sometimes, conflict escalates very quickly, and both parties are not thinking clearly enough to resolve their conflict without causing harm to the other person and/or the relationship. When individuals get flooded with strong emotions, it can be hard to think clearly enough to be able to resolve the conflict. It is important to recognize that the conflict has gotten out of hand and know when to walk away.

Generally, in the average person, when their pulse is over 100 beats per minute when arguing, they may not be able to think clearly enough to resolve the conflict. Nowadays, with so many people wearing smart watches or fitness tracking devices on their wrists, it is easy to check pulse rates. If not, think about how and where you feel distress in your body when you “lose it .” That is the time to walk away. When one person walks away from conflict, it can cause the other person to feel they are being abandoned or what they are trying to say is being disregarded, so it helps to plan ahead.

Give yourself some time to calm down. Preferably at least 20 minutes, up to 24 hours, but it shouldn't be longer than that, according to Dr. John Gottman, a well-known couple researcher (Gottman & Gottman, 2014). During that time, avoid thinking about the situation because it can make you even more upset. Think ahead of time about what types of things help you calm down after a fight. Then, when in a calmer mood, come back to resolve the conflict. It helps to realize that according to Dr. Gottman's research, 70% of couple issues are unresolvable, so most of the time, you will not be able to resolve the issue completely, but you can at least come to some sort of agreement.

Christians often think they shouldn't go to bed angry, so they may feel conflict has to be resolved before going to sleep. The later the fight goes into the night, the harder it will be to resolve the problem. The people involved in the conflict can agree to resolve the problem the next day after getting some rest. It may be harder to sleep, so pray for the Lord's guidance to resolve the conflict. The main point is not to let anger continue and fester.

## CONCLUSION

God created humanity in his image. The differences we see in society are a reflection of God in us. We are all His children, part of the family of God. The Bible reminds us, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free – and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.” I Corinthians 12:13

Conflict within the family is inevitable in a sinful world. There are some societal issues that are intensifying these challenges. The Lord has given us guidance in the Bible and direction through others with expertise in these areas. Remember, we have more in common than we realize. These issues are not new; there were differences in the early Christian church too. “Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.” Colossians 3:11

God has called us to share the good news of salvation through His son, Jesus Christ. Who will listen to that good news if it isn't shared out of love?

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