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October 2003 - Vol 4 - Issue 10

# Setting A Good Example

by Matthew McGahran,LCSW, Counselor

Common sense tells us that children will often copy the behaviors they are taught in their households.

"Children Learn What They Live" is a phrase we have heard that means that children will learn to mimic behavior they observe. If a child observes hostility, he will exhibit hostility. If he experiences abuse, there is a good chance he will act abusively. Children raised in households that value love and respect will grow up being loving and respectful adults.

Parents are typically the most influential people in children's lives.

Scientists at Penn State University, who study parent/child interaction state, "children have frequent opportunities to observe their parents at home and elsewhere, children's interpersonal styles should, to a certain extent, resemble those of their parents." Children observe and are aware of their parents' positive and negative feelings and interactions. Unfortunately, it is the distressed negative feelings that have more influence over the child's emotional development. Children with distressed parents are less likely than children with non-distressed parents to observe and learn the positive behaviors (such as showing support, compromising, and resolving disagreements amicably) that create mutually satisfying, long-term relationships with others.

The Penn State Study showed that, "when parents reported more conflict, problems, and instability in their marriages, children reported less happiness, less interaction, more conflict, more problems, and greater instability." These relationship problems continue throughout the child's life and into his adulthood. The negative interacting often disrupts the marriages of children who have come form unstable homes.
The list of negative problems due to an unstable home continues, "emotional insecurity due to growing up with distressed parents may lead adolescents to have sexual relations at a relatively early age, thus increasing the risk of a non-marital birth.

Emotionally needy offspring may marry at an early age to leave the parental home... evidence indicates that parental [distress] increases the odds that offspring have a non-marital birth, marry early, cohabit prior to marriage, and divorce".

On the lighter side, steps taken to decrease the problems in a household often reflect positively on the children. In many ways, children who experience the stress of parental disagreements and dysfunction and see a positive resolution to the problems are better able to control and cope with the problems they will face in their adult relationships.
Problems are inevitable in any relationship, particularly in families.

The problems do not have to lead to instability in a family and they do not have to contribute to a child's insecurity. Positive problem-solving and open communication teach children that they will have problems and they can solve those problems.

Learning positive skills to resolve difficult family issues is probably the best gift we can give our children.

If you would like information or counseling to help you learn the skills needed to positively resolve problems in your family, contact the Fleet and Family Support Center to make an appointment with one of our clinical social workers.

The quotes in this article are from The Legacy of Parents' Marital Discord: Consequences for Children's Marital Quality
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