

PRIORITY THREE/CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

PARENTING: CONFIDENCE

Monty Roberts knows something about the important role confidence plays in the development of a happy child. His book, *Horsesense for People*, is an insightful revelation of how shy, skittish horses can be broken in around thirty minutes with a technique that is equally effective in developing a healthy confidence with children. He knows what he is talking about—he has raised 47 foster children.

The kind of confidence we are talking about is where a child has a firm enough foundation to test his or her ideas, values, and relationships in a nurturing environment. The child feels the freedom to both accept responsibilities and to fly.

Confidence doesn't just happen. It is the result of someone taking the time to release a child from fears or insecurities and be given the opportunity to reach his or her potential.

Not all children begin that way—neither do horses; in fact, neither do dogs. In his book, *Lessons From A Sheep Dog*, Phillip Keller describes how he rescued a chained-up Border Collie, Lass, who would chase kids and cars in an urban setting. He used the same techniques as Monty Roberts to rebuild the confidence and to release Lass in the green pastures near Vancouver, Canada. There she found her true calling as a sheep dog.

On the human side of the story, psychologist Flip Flippen has taught public school teachers for years a similar model of transformation that can capture a kid's heart—the EXCEL program. As a result, thousands of children have found a liberating confidence because of the deliberate involvement of teachers who care about them.

A technique so pervasively effective in altering human behavior should have precedence somewhere in Scripture or imbedded in the principles that flow from its teaching. We

find it in the way Jesus approached the woman at the well (John 4). This Samaritan woman had much going against her. She was a minority person in her sexual identity, her cultural setting, and her religious surroundings, and she was damaged from many failed relationships with men. She was like Lass—chained by her circumstances—or like one of the beaten horses who found a new lease on life at the liberating hands of Monty Roberts. She was changed because Jesus took the time to focus on her, speak kindly to her, and see potential in her.

The steps taken by Jesus, Roberts, Keller and Flippen boil down to five phases that allow a dramatic connection to take place. This builds a new foundation for confidence and a new creation operating out of a new core of understanding.

The Engage Phase

Monty Roberts gets the horse in the ring and lets him know he wants to have a relationship. He calls this *joining up*. It's the same as when Phillip Keller unchained Lass and put her in the back seat of his car for a trip to the country. It's also Jesus speaking to a Samaritan woman (something Jews never did) and saying to her, "*Will you give me a drink?*" (John 4:7). In all of these occasions, an intentional connection was made where the initiator was making the statement, "*I want to be a part of your life.*"

That is the starting point in building confidence in children. We take the time to stoop or kneel to get on their eye level. We let them know we have no other agenda than to connect, to engage in such a way that the child will think that no one else or no other thing at this moment matters.

The Explore/Story Phase

Once we have their full attention and they know they have ours, we ask questions that will help open their world.

After the join-up phase, Monty Roberts will rub his hands over the horse's body to find where the muscles vibrate or where the horse tries to back away, lift his head, or avoid contact. Monty calls this finding the story—the place that the horse has been kicked, whipped, or abused. He then removes the leash and encourages the horse to run—to be free—to see that he is not being chased or attempting to be dominated. Phillip Keller did the same thing with Lass. He knew her story of confinement and knew that she had to be released to run away from the ranch house, with the possibility that she might never return. Jesus explained the life-story of the Samaritan woman in John 4:16. He said, “*Go call your husband and come back.*” Being the God of the Universe, Jesus knew that this woman currently had a man living with her who was not her husband and that she had been married many times. At that point, Jesus wanted to explore with her the conditions of her life, but also to give her a chance to run if she was now overly uncomfortable.

No child is emotionally healthy if he or she has to live with the reality that no one cares enough to ask penetrating questions in an atmosphere of love. The Samaritan woman formed an immediate connection of trust with Jesus that allowed her to open up and start talking rapid-fire about issues that were important to her. Monty Roberts' horses don't run long before they come back to the center of the ring to reconnect. Lass was gone for several weeks but would appear around the perimeter of the ranch from time to time until she eventually came from behind Phillip Keller to nudge him with her wet nose as if to say, “*I'm ready to talk.*”

Not every conversation with a child will be deep and profound, but all conversations will be meaningful. And when you want to hear their stories, they will grow up wanting to hear yours.

The Communication Phase

After the Engage and Explore phases, real communication is possible. Jesus can talk about worshipping God in Spirit and Truth with a person who is ready to listen. Lass can

be trained both verbally and with hand signals how to be an obedient sheep dog and a partner with her master. The child doesn't see instruction as another nagging session, but as a time to learn and to grow.

The Empower Phase

When we deeply touch another person, we empower that person to do things they never imagined.

When Jesus revealed to the woman at the well that he was the Messiah, everything in her life changed. Monty's horses take a saddle on their backs—highly unusual because a horse sees anything on its back as a predator. That's one of the places a mountain lion would target, a vulnerable spot in the life and death encounter. And Lass returned to the liberation of once again following her true nature, to be a sheep dog.

The point of empowerment is different for every child, but it is the point at which he or she sees the world differently. The old fears fall away and new possibilities become excitingly clear. We are ready for the fifth phase.

The Launch Phase

With the saddle on its back, the horse now takes the rider and is ready to run. The sheep dog, Lass, works in tandem with her master to move sheep, chase wandering sheep, protect sheep, scold sheep, and stay with and guard sheep. The woman of John 4 runs home and says, "*Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?*" (John 4:29) In a matter of minutes, the Samaritan's nature changed from a woman without morals or focus to an evangelist.

Every child, once empowered, is launched like an arrow toward a target, usually in the direction that reveals his or her created nature. Children may experiment with their gifts and talents but always with their parents' affirmation from parents.

In addition to the five phases of building confidence in a child, four areas need special attention within the home. These are like adding protein powder or complex carbohydrates to a health drink.

Confidence from Predictable Parents

It's nearly impossible for a child to develop confidence if his or her parents are unpredictable in how they act or react regarding punishment for rules that are violated. Clearly communicating that constant responses to unwanted behavior can be counted on, creates remorse but not confusion. The same is true for hard work. Predictably rewarding or praising a job well done also boosts the confidence. This applies in many areas. No parent is perfect, and we all will fail at being consistent. When we return to the predictable patterns, we reinforce not only what we are trying to teach but also the confidence level of our children.

Our predictable response cycle should also include humor.

Jim is a good father. After scolding or reprimanding his kids, he doesn't follow with a barrage of insults like, "*Suck it up, kid, and stop crying like a girl.*" Jim knows the importance of connecting on another level after he has been stern, maybe even harsh. He knows the importance of laughter through the tears. He may say something funny or witty; he may playfully wrestle his child to the floor and tickle him, he may even act silly. But he knows the important role humor plays in re-establishing the kids' identity and confidence, and he is a master of the well-timed transformation from serious discipline to light-heartedness. His kids are well-adjusted and have few problems with their confidence levels.

Confidence in Boy/Girl Relationships

Every boy and girl wonders, even frets, over how to handle dating. Hallway talk at school can make it appear that some students are old pros and conquering kings and queens of the dating realm. But dating isn't easy for the majority of students. So Mom and Dad can help build confidence in this area by taking an adolescent on a "practice date."

Roger did that with his daughter, Kathy. They went to a nice restaurant. Roger opened the door of the car for her and politely sat her at the table—he showed her how a young lady should be treated. He helped her with ideas from the menu, carried on a light conversation with the waiter, and used his best manners, but always with an eye on how he could make Kathy feel comfortable while enjoying the meal and the ambiance of this special evening. Roger opened the subject of what to look for when she was on a date with her special someone. The topic was a little awkward because he had to reveal the more prurient side of a boy's thoughts and intentions. Having this "practice date" not only taught Kathy what to expect from a decent young man but also to know the warning signals that come from off-color remarks or other comments that make it obvious that it is time to go.

Boys need that special time of sharing with their mothers as well, and both sexes need to understand that dating boundaries established by their parents are for their protection and should be more welcomed than challenged.

Confidence comes from knowing what to expect but also in having respect for themselves and others. This respect is not only taught, it is reinforced over and over again for years. Respect for their peers, respect for the opposite sex, and respect for adults and learning how to address someone with focus and manners take time and practice.

Confidence to Become Independent

A teenage girl was attending a summer youth camp high in the Colorado mountains and feeling uncomfortable with all of the “God talk” from the evening services. She grabbed a counselor and blurted out, *“I don’t believe in God!”* The counselor didn’t bat an eye or act alarmed. He calmly responded, *“Tell me about the God you don’t believe in. Maybe I don’t believe in him either.”* All of the steam was taken out of her shock statement. She had no one to argue with, especially one who should have reacted with alarm.

Confidence comes when one finds himself or herself in what family therapist Dr. Rod Cooper calls an “Open System.” He divides family living styles into either open or closed systems. Here is the basic description of each.

Closed System

In this situation, those who are in authority (the parents) are very authoritarian. They require their children to be rigidly obedient to rules, expectations, and values. This high demand of obedience, however, is more for the sake of the parent than the children. Mom and Dad are more worried about how they appear, their status and reputation, than the development and emotional inner strength of their children.

The atmosphere in a closed family system is usually tense, tight, defensive and negative. You don’t see a lot of laughter or fun. In fact, the kids tend to stay outside a lot and don’t feel comfortable inviting their friends over to the home. They are taught what to think, how to conform, and how to maintain the family reputation.

Open System

Parents who take the open approach still have rules and boundaries for behavior. Their emphasis, however, is more on *why* than *what*. In trying to create a warm, trusting environment, the parents’ caring and good-natured approach is attempts to help children to internalize the values that hopefully are being caught, not just taught. These parents

listen a lot, laugh a lot, communicate a lot, ask lots of questions, discipline their children when necessary, and build a foundation of confidence that what the parents hold dear as valuable is worthy for the children as well.

With this environment, the parents are confident that their sons and daughters are on their way to a healthy independence and with an internal compass to make solid decisions in life.

As in our stories of Monty Roberts' horses or with Lass the Border Collie, each animal eventually returned to his trainer because it could do so freely and without compulsion. The story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11–31 is an example on the human scale of what happens when a wayward child knew he had the freedom to return home to a father with out-stretched arms as well as the freedom to run away and fail. If that son had grown up under a closed system, he may never have returned.

Confidence in Career Choices

A parent who applauds his children's skills is a confidence builder. Each child has areas of competence—the key is to find these and to provide every opportunity to see them developed. That takes experimentation and much patience. It also takes testing for abilities that motivate the child. The sad child is the one who has no adult to help him find himself, find his interests and passions, find what school is best suited for him, find a menu of jobs that would be a “fit.”

With all that is said in this chapter about confidence, you can usually see it reflected in one place—the eyes. The confident child's eyes are bright, they twinkle, they are enthusiastic, they are hopeful, they are a little mischievous, and they make you want to look inside and say, *“I don't know where you are going but it will be fun to watch you get there!”*

After spending three years with Jesus, his disciples had that look in their eyes. They were transformed by the love and openness he showed them, for knowing they had the freedom to encounter anyone at any time with his life-changing message. And if they failed, they always had another day. Those who follow Jesus' example would provide their children with the same opportunity.