

PRIORITY THREE/CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

PARENTING: IDENTITY

Nearly every person has looked in the mirror and thought, “If only my nose wasn’t so big . . .” “If only I could lose weight . . .” “If only I didn’t have bags under my eyes . . .”

This discussion begins in early childhood and continues for the rest of life. Voices from the past shaped the image in the mirror. Parents, whether they realized it or not, shaped their children’s futures by accepting, affirming, acknowledging, and appreciating their uniqueness. They played the most important role in helping children feel good about themselves or creating fragile identities through negative talk and criticism. The culture also played a big role. The message constantly hammered through movies, TV, radio, and commercials is that you are OK if you have beauty, brains, bucks (or things), and brawn. It is a constant barrage of messages that screams out, “You don’t measure up!”

During the middle school years, students are the most vulnerable. If their identity is not greatly strengthened through affirmation at home, they may look all right on the outside, but on the inside they are crushed.

Peretti’s Burden

That’s what happened to Frank Peretti, best-selling novelist. For more than thirty years, no one knew that a wounded spirit had nearly crushed him during his junior high school days. He probably wouldn’t have told his story if not for the Columbine High School killing spree perpetrated by Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris.

In comparing himself to Klebold and Harris, Peretti makes no excuses for those killers’ behavior, but he also explains the anger that festers when someone is bullied and his or her identity lies in ruins. He came forward to tell his story because he believes that those

who are made to feel inferior carry great psychological wounds. He thought that he might be able to prevent another Columbine.

As an infant, Frank had been rushed to the hospital because of a growth on the side of his neck that was beginning to strangle him. He had cystic hygroma, which led to an accompanying malady of a swollen tongue. With black oozing scabs, his tongue would stick out of his mouth and would cause painful embarrassment.

His junior high locker room was a terrifying. As skinny as a rail and with this grotesque facial problem, Frank was the victim of physical and mental tormenting. The stronger boys would slam him up against the lockers, snap him with wet towels, and humiliate him with name-calling. In fact, Peretti says he can still hear their voices, recall their names, and remember how desperately he wanted to get even.

Two things prevented him from exacting his revenge. One was his parents who loved and supported him unconditionally, and the other was a teacher who found out what was going on and wouldn't just shrug it off . . . a teacher who was willing to ask a downcast boy, "How are you doing?" As a result, he saw the school counselor and was spared further harassment.

How can Parents Help?

So, what can parents do to help their children have healthy identities? They know their kids aren't perfect and act like hellish imps at times. They also realize that their kids are fragile and need a steady stream of encouragement. Over time, each child needs to understand two facts: first, he or she is a sinful creature living in a fallen world (Romans 3:23); two, he or she is the apex of God's creation (Psalm 139). Children soon learn, without any effort, that they must deal with their corrupt nature. Because of that, the Evil One constantly pummels them with depreciating phrases such as, "You're no good,"

“You’ll always be a disappointment,” “How disgusting,” and “You will never be anything but a loser.”

Here is where parents can come to the rescue, not to rescue kids from the reality of their sinfulness but from an identity that is marred by lies. So, is there anything parents can do? Absolutely! *They can take at least four actions.*

Love Them Unconditionally

The psalmist says with delight “I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14), and again “What is man that you are mindful of him, and the Son of Man that you care for him? Yet, You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor” (Psalm 8:4–5). God loves his creation unconditionally. That’s how parents should love their children.

Each child is unique—one of a kind. God has given each one a unique fingerprint and a special touch. No child should be compared with brothers and sisters and expected to develop at anyone’s pace except his or her own.

Just like adults, each child has a love language and needs to be loved in that language. Children reveal their love languages by the way they treat their parents or their siblings. According to Gary Chapman, the five love languages are as follows: physical touch, gifts, acts of service, words, and quality time.

At age 2½, Gabriel revealed two of these languages. He’s all boy, loves to wrestle and tumble, knows no fear, and is in perpetual motion every waking moment. When his dad is taking out the garbage, Gabe wants to carry a bag. When the lawn is being mowed, he has to serve by sweeping the grass into piles. When his mother comes home with groceries, he insists on carrying a bag inside. Sounds like Gabriel’s love language is *acts of service*. Yes, but he also is affectionate—wants to hug and kiss (*physical touch*). Eventually, one

of these will become more dominant. So, how do Gabriel's parents show love to him? In whatever way works, but returning affection or doing things for him is a sure winner.

Parenting requires a lot of experimentation. What works with one child doesn't necessarily work with another. In fact, what works one week may fail the next week. This process can be both encouraging and exasperating. With young children, we have ample opportunity to find the right formula for capturing their hearts and directing their growth. We also have time to recover from a failed mission.

So don't panic . . . making mistakes is part of the journey, and kids recover quickly, especially when they know they are loved unconditionally.

Affirm Their Worth

We know that our children are extremely valuable, *but do they?* Every child, at periodic times in his or her development, needs to feel special.

David, a man in his mid-fifties, was walking down a church hall one day and stopped to make way for a line of eight or nine children who were going from recess in their day-care routine back to their home room. At the end of the queue was a three-year-old girl who looked up at David and began to hit his leg. David knelt down in an attempt to make a connection, but the girl continued to hit him with her little fists. The day-care leader looked back and noticed what was going on, stepped in to pick up the child, and followed up with an apology. "I'm sorry, but Shannon has no father or any other man in her life, and from time to time, she acts out in this way."

Little Shannon had a spontaneous reaction of frustration that stemmed from a hole in her heart with meaningful male to fill it. So what does every child craves? We can sum it up in four basic desires.

1. Children crave affection.

Counselors will explain that adults can damage a child's identity as much by withholding praise as by verbal outbursts. Children need to hear adults repeat, "I love you" or "I'm proud of you."

You may respond, "What if they have been messing up? What if I'm not feeling love toward them? What if I'm not proud of them?" Surely you don't feel this way all the time. Compliments need to be timed correctly to be effective anyway. Look for the little things they do well and acknowledge those. Tell them you love them when you tuck them in to bed at night.

2. Children want to be wanted.

Children know when adults enjoy hanging around in their world, when they get down on their level to wrestle, play, or just have a talk. One of the most positive things a parent can do is to invite the child's comments and conversation at a table of adults. A child feels wanted and significant when a parent takes him or her seriously. When a child tells silly stories, the parent goes along with it and asks questions to allow him or her to elaborate. When you participate in their world, they want to participate in yours.

You can tell when a child feels wanted and significant—they feel comfortable in the presence of adults. They are comfortable in their own skin, no matter what age. They also feel comfortable in the presence of adult strangers. This carries its own dangers, but children can be taught to look for threatening signals or how to stay away from unsafe situations.

3. Children want to be hugged.

Several years ago, a disturbing book was published. *Love at Goon Park*, written by Deborah Blum, illustrates the tragic consequences when children are deprived

the most basic human emotion of love.

The book featured stories from orphanages. In the middle of the 18th century, the Hospital of the Innocents in Florence, Italy received more than 15,000 babies over two decades. Ten thousand of those children died before they reached their first birthdays.

A 1915 study stated that of the nine in ten orphanages surveyed, no child survived past the age of two. The prevailing wisdom of the time was that infections were spread by touch. In order to prevent the opportunity for a baby to be exposed to germs, special boxes with inlet sleeves were used to allow a nurse or staff person to change a diaper without having a skin-on-skin encounter with the child. In addition, popular psychology publications warned the public about giving too much love out of the fear of spreading disease. All of this nonsense was called to intellectual accountability when psychologist Harry Harlow revealed the terrible results for those deprived of physical affection.

Touching is not just important; it is essential for human health. Hugging and loving on babies changes over the years, to horsing around, especially with boys. But whether it's sons or daughters, both need to feel the touch of both parents and to let the emotional strength empower them for the rest of their lives.

4. Children want to be appreciated.

This comes when a child feels they are making a contribution to the family. That's why enlisting their help with household chores or work projects is important. It teaches them discipline and gives them a sense of self worth. The happiest adolescents on the planet are those who have grown up playing on a team—the family team. They learned what hard work and expected results were all about; consequently, they could celebrate as a family over the tasks they completed

together. Every home has needed yard work, repairs, or some other facelift, and an “atta-boy” is a wonderful payment to those who pitch in and work hard.

Acknowledge Each One’s Uniqueness.

In the last point, we talked about how important it is for a child to feel special. This also happens when the parent understands how each child is unique and how different children are from one another. Finding and celebrating each one’s uniqueness is critical because if the parents don’t identify it, the child will look for it the rest of his or her life.

It’s easier for parents to give attention and point out the uniquenesses of children who are the first child, the funny child, the beautiful child, the smart child, or the talented child. But what about the one who doesn’t seem to be exceptional?

The parent can start by looking for this child’s motivated pattern. What are they motivated to do? What do they do well? A child who spends hours working with Legos or creates a complex design with other materials is sending a message. This child’s unique motivated pattern may be toward design or engineering. Children also display behavioral patterns. Some are extremely loyal; some are courageous and some compassionate. Some play the role of peacemaker.

A parent who is trying to shape the children’s identity can help them identify, celebrate, and develop a latent talent. This means that the parents’ dream for their son playing outfield for the Red Sox may need to be shelved, exchanging the baseball mitt for a violin. Kids will gravitate toward their patterns, with or without their parents’ encouragement.

Appreciate their presence.

A public school survey in Maryland revealed that parents spend an average of 15 minutes a week in meaningful dialogue with their children—not much time for either bonding or molding. Time pressures in the 21st century are intense. Most parents do not intentionally spend time away from their kids but rather drift into lifestyles with little connection.

At some point in time, every parent wakes up and wonders either where the time went or where it is going. Yes, children do grow up fast. So we need to slow down long enough to enjoy each day we have with them. We should observe their world. What pictures do they have on their walls? Who are their friends? What is their favorite music? What gets them excited?

Make eating dinner together as a family a high priority. And make it fun. For example, you could play the “what if” game. “What if you had \$1,000—what would you spend it on?” “What if you could go anywhere—where would you go?” What if you could have a conversation with someone from history—who would that be?” Adding fun to the equation is a way to make children feel wanted and appreciated. You can even have fun with spiritual questions. The father could state: “Tonight we are going to have a family discussion on whether we really believe the story about Jonah and the big fish is true.” Everyone is allowed to chime in, give his or her opinion, and then defend it.

Putting your own beliefs up for debate is a way of saying “I’m not holding on to them just because it’s the thing to do, but I appreciate your view and we ought to search for a conclusion together.” This is another way of implementing Psalm 78:1–4. If handled right, you are also creating an appetite for the things of God and you can enjoy the flavor together.