

Choices

INTRODUCTION FOR PARENTS

A father from Wisconsin showed special insight when he spoke about choices he made:

“Sometimes in the scrambled schedule of life I get to feeling like the time I spend with my sons could better be spent on work. And then I remind myself that the budget request or schedule of who works when or the productivity report will affect life for a few days or weeks. I have to do it and it is somewhat important—but my job as a father is most important. If I’m a good father to my sons they are likely to be good fathers, too. Someday after I’m gone, and certainly after those reports have rotted, a grandchild or great-grandchild of mine will have a good father or mother because I was a good father. It’s kind of a chain reaction.”

A businessman from Oklahoma made some wise choices:

“I used to worry a lot; in my business it’s easy to do. It got to the point it was about to break me. Then somehow a very important thing happened to me and I don’t know exactly how it happened. I finally realized deep within myself that it was not possible for me to control every little aspect of my life as well as the lives of others, as I had been trying to do. I decided that I could do the best that I could do, but then I had to let go. I had to trust more in other people and in life. I can’t do everything on my own, I can’t carry the world on my shoulders. This realization gave me an indescribable feeling of relief. Now I’m a much more relaxed, effective and productive person.”

Every person and every family has problems. The choices we make as to how we deal with our problems largely determine our happiness or unhappiness. No matter how devastating our circumstances, we can still choose how we think and how we perceive life. Included in the lesson on responsibility is Eleanor Roosevelt’s famous quote, “No one can offend me without my permission.” We can choose how we react to our circumstances, our environment, and the people around us. Choice is powerful and truly a gift. Even as I write that statement I fully understand that many, many choices in our lives are beyond our control. However, the choice of attitude is always ours.

I’d like to share some ideas for dealing with problems, based on research completed at the University of Oklahoma. These are all positive choices for families as they deal with conflict:

1. Focus on the positive. Problems can be painful, but they can also be turning points. Families should try to learn something positive from each challenge. The ability to focus on how our problems can make us stronger is a habit that takes time. When problems arise, family members can help one another form this good habit by asking,

“What can we learn from this?” or, “How can this challenge help strengthen our family?”

2. Maintain open channels of communication. The free expression of all family members' feelings is an important step in surviving a crisis. When everybody in a family knows that they are being listened to and that their concerns are being considered, there is a sense of togetherness and strength.
3. **Pull together as a family.** Family members need to unite when facing problems. Former United States President John F. Kennedy once said, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” We can use a similar idea in our homes. Instead of focusing on our own individual needs, we should ask one another, “What can I do to help you?” In a crisis situation it is especially important to ask family members what their needs are and how we can help them. When a family pulls together this way, nobody takes all the responsibility for a problem--it is shared. This is like putting fifty pounds on your back instead of three hundred. Ideally, families are like teams. They have goals and they work together to be successful. When families act like a team, pulling together for maximum strength, they can better overcome obstacles and reach their goals.
3. Stay flexible. Change is unavoidable. It's how we adapt to change that helps create our happiness or unhappiness. Flexibility is the key for families, like any organization, when coping with change. Flexibility doesn't mean doing away with rules. It means being willing to adjust how things may be done in the family and who does them. This includes changing responsibilities and roles as family members grow. It also means that during times of crisis family members need to cheerfully adapt to changes that may be necessary to weather the storm. Again, family members' attitudes--the choices they make as to how they'll react--make all the difference.
4. Draw on spiritual resources. Many strong families hold to a way of life that includes a belief in God. They use this belief to influence their day-to-day decisions and to sustain them during times of crisis.
5. Seek help outside the family. Families are a special unit unto themselves, but they shouldn't be isolated from others. Most strong families have outside relationships who can be called on in times of need. Families should seek others' help when needed, and give help when others have need.

Problems can be a gift. They provide opportunities to use our strengths, help us appreciate the good times, and help families grow closer together. How we perceive and deal with our

challenges are significant choices.

Entrepreneur Zig Ziglar said, “You are free to choose, but the choices you make today will determine what you will have, be, and do in the tomorrow of your life.”

Individuals and families occasionally need to take a “time out” and evaluate their life choices. Sometimes at first our decisions seem to be good ones, but experience teaches us we were wrong. Usually, we have choices as to how we can “get back on course” with our lives. Often, however, these choices are difficult, even when we know they are best for our family. Sometimes I have seen parents choose to continue on destructive courses because it was too much effort to make the needed changes.

More frequently than we realize, our choices produce a ripple effect and alter the lives of others. I would like to share an example of the ripple effect caused by a decision made in our family. After my husband, Gil, had taught high school for fifteen years, he became unhappy with his career course. He wanted to teach at a university. To earn the necessary Ph.D. he needed to be a university professor, Gil needed to go back to college for an additional four years. Unfortunately, the closest university was two and one-half hours away from our home. So Gil lived in a little attic room near the University of Washington during the week and returned home only on weekends. At that time we had six children. They were ages 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13 years old. This was not an easy choice. It wasn't long before the full impact of the ripple effect, caused by this choice, was felt in many lives. After years of being a stay-at-home mom, I returned to school teaching. Our children learned to get along without a full-time Dad, and it gave them empathy for those with similar circumstances. My parents, Wendell and Gwen Noble, respected Gil's choice and moved 2,000 miles to be near us and help during this challenge. They were with us for three years. Additionally, Gil's parents, Warren and Marian Fellingham, assisted us during this time.

Gil's choice resulted in an entire family effort. Some of the consequences? Well, it was a very long four years. We often got discouraged and impatient with the hurdles we encountered. Frequently we had to re-focus on our goal to make it through the long days of family separation. However, the positive consequences of Gil's choice to earn a Ph.D. are many. I learned to appreciate and empathize with single mothers; the children have close relationships with their grandparents because of time spent together; as a family we pulled together and endured to the end of a challenging time; Gil now has doctorate in biostatistics and is teaching at the university of his choice. He absolutely loves his job, and he has a great appreciation for the sacrifices made on his behalf.

All choices have consequences. Sometimes the results of our choices are good, and sometimes the consequences are negative, even devastating. I suggest that before making choices, whenever possible, we follow these seven steps:

6. Study all possibilities. Research, if necessary, all possible “angles” of the choice,

- taking whatever time is needed to make the correct decision.
7. Don't make rush decisions, especially on life-changing choices.
 8. Discuss your thoughts with family members and trusted friends.
 9. Keep an open mind and sincerely consider all of the possibilities.
 10. Pray about your decision.
 11. Make your choice.
 12. If, after your best efforts, your choice was not ideal, don't regret it. Perhaps you could think this: "I made the best decision I could with the information I had at the time." Then go on with your life.

Free-agency is a God-given gift. How we use our agency in this life is usually our choice.