

CHAPTER 10

Conversations that Matter – Cultivating Good Communication

“You are so lazy, you’ll never amount to anything!”

Because Carl’s mother had said those words to him so many times, he had long ago accepted them as true and lost his incentive to try to please her.

Carl’s father was an abusive alcoholic who never offered any words of encouragement.

The summer Carl turned 15, he went to visit his uncle’s ranch. He admired the gruff old cowboy and wanted very much to gain his uncle’s approval. As Carl worked alongside his uncle he found great satisfaction at the end of each day when his uncle, a man of few words, would say the phrase he’d grown to love: “Boy, you done good.”

Carl says, “Those summers I spent with my uncle transformed me. Though he spoke very little, what he did say made me *believe* I had value. I owe my success in life to that old cowboy.”

Proverbs 18:21 says, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” Have you ever considered how powerfully your words influence your son? You have been blessed with the wonderful task of training, teaching, correcting, and encouraging your son—so choose your words carefully.

Since good dialogue is an essential part of training your son to be a godly man, as we continue looking at the principles of good parenting we will look now at some practical ways you can develop better communication with your son.

PRINCIPLE 5: Learn how to talk so your son listens, and listen so he talks.

Learning to speak to your son in ways he will consider your message will require effort on your part. So, the following paragraphs contain 15 steps to help you learn how:

1. Involve your son's emotions. “The most effective communication always includes an emotional ingredient—the *feeling* factor, the *excitement* element.”¹ So when you talk to your son about important issues infuse your conversation with elements that will involve his emotions.

Using word pictures is a great way to touch on the feelings of a listener. For example, if your son tends to ignore his younger brother, you might tell your son a story like:

“Imagine you are on a basketball team. You like all of your teammates, but you especially look up to the star player. However, whenever you try to talk to him, he refuses to listen. And when you try to get his attention by doing nice things for him, he ignores your efforts. How would that make you feel?” After your son talks about how the rejection might affect him, you can say, “That is how you make your little brother feel every time you treat him like he is insignificant.”

When you get your son to *feel* the impact of his actions on his little brother, he is more likely to adjust how he treats him.

2. Engage your son's intellect. Help your son understand your point by giving him logical reasons he can follow. Teach your son to think through the views you present, and how to respond after intelligently considering your message. To influence your son with your message, he must believe you are passionately convinced your ideas are worthwhile. When your son sees you genuinely believe in your principles, and can logically discern how they work for you, he will be drawn to consider your message.

3. Develop shared interests with your son. This practice will also lay the foundation for good communication. So make it your goal to establish things in common with your son. A well-

¹ Dr. Howard Hendricks, *Teaching to Change Lives* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1987), 72.

known college professor says, “The greater the commonality, the greater the potential for communication.”²

4. Ask your son questions. Proverbs 20:5 says, “Counsel [or motives] in the heart of a man is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.” Like a deep well, your son holds thoughts in his heart. Asking pertinent questions will show your son you are genuinely interested in who he is and what he is thinking, and help you understand his motivations and concerns.

By making statements like, “Help me understand how you feel about that. What happened next? How did it make you feel when that happened?” you will show your son you are attentive and genuinely engaged in the conversation.

Not only will making inquiries encourage your son to share his stories with you, it will help you learn how he responds to life, and others.

5. Listen well. Everyone longs to be heard by the people who are important to them. When you listen to your son, you send him the message that he is significant and valuable, and what he says matters to you. As he talks about events, make a mental note of names and reactions of people in the story. Remembering details—such as his friend’s names—shows your son you are attentive when he talks. And tells your son, “Your relationships matter to me.”

Your attentive listening will establish an atmosphere that will encourage future conversations, and will provide you with further opportunities to teach him a biblical worldview, or a biblical way to interact with his world.

² Dr. Howard Hendricks, *Teaching to Change Lives* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1987), 70.

Joseph's father was deaf, and even though he could communicate through sign language to his father, it was Joseph's mother, Rebecca, who went to great lengths to listen to him and help his father understand him. Her commitment to help her son be heard made Rebecca the single most influential person in Joseph's life. Joseph says this about his mother:

My mother, Rebecca, influenced me spiritually more than any other single individual...She raised six children, and because my father was deaf, my mom had to be the ears for both of them. Despite the difficulty, my mother is one of the best, and most patient, communicators I know. She has inspired me to work on my own communication skills and patience. My mother consistently mirrored the love and patience of Christ. If it wasn't for my mom's example of patience, hard work, and fearing God, I'm not sure I'd be the Christian I am today.

Joseph's story reveals the value he placed upon his mother listening to him. Her wise commitment provided Rebecca the opportunity to influence her son's life with the gospel and a biblical worldview.

6. Delight in your son. Enjoy your son by learning to delight in *who he is*. "When you delight in understanding your children you are expressing your love for them."³ Laugh at your son's jokes, cheer him on, cry with him. *Feel what he feels*. When something exciting happens, be the person your son cannot wait to share his experience with. By making an effort to express approval and delight in your son, you will encourage him to communicate with you, and will naturally open opportunities for you to guide your son with truth.

7. Be joyful. Would your son use the word *joyful* to describe your family? Nehemiah 8:10 promises, "The joy of the Lord is your strength." I know one mother whose husband was terribly harsh to her son. In spite of the father's overshadowing hostility, she determined to let the Lord's

³ Tedd & Margy Tripp, *Instructing a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, PN: Shepherd Press, 2008), 176.

joy strengthen her. Her son, who is now an adult, says his mother's joy amidst tumultuous times was a beacon of light that gave him hope and directed him to Christ.

No matter how difficult life becomes, you can cultivate a happy heart by talking about the many blessings found in Christ. And by example you can teach your son to celebrate the life, joy and purpose found in a relationship with Jesus Christ. If you determine to rejoice about even the simplest favors from the Lord, you will sow seeds of joy in your family, and form a secure base for godly communication.

8. Teach him to communicate. If your son is not a big talker, look for opportune times to ask him questions that might encourage him to talk to you. Try asking him something like, "What is one thing you are struggling with right now?" Or "Why is John your best friend?" Or "What is your favorite thing about school?" Give your son time to think before he speaks. Don't answer the question for him. If he is unable to put his response into words, you could casually present him with some multiple-choice answers. But again, give him time to respond.

You can also teach your son how to talk in a way that will hold the interest of others. For example, when my son Brandon's voice was changing, to avoid the embarrassment of having his voice crack in the middle of a conversation, he purposefully talked in a quiet monotone manner. Once his vocal cords matured and this cracking was no longer a problem, however, he continued to speak in a low drone.

I waited for the right time to talk to Brandon about working inflections into his speech. I gave my son a few examples of how monotone speech sounded, and helped him recall how some of his favorite people to listen to would raise and lower their voice pitch to drive home important points.

Because I had already established an “I am for you” relationship with Brandon, he was not offended. Rather, he was grateful for my suggestion. Brandon said he knew he wanted to work on being a more interesting speaker, but had no idea what changes to make.

9. Learn to read your son’s body language. “Research has shown that our words account for only 7 percent of everything we communicate to others.”⁴ Your son’s body language may reveal to you how he is receiving your message, or if he is even listening to you. So observe your son’s physical responses while you speak to him. If he has a glazed-over look, folded arms, or a set jaw, he may have tuned you out.

If you realize you have lost your son’s attention, don’t talk louder in your attempt to get him to listen. Heed the advice from Proverbs 15:1: “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” If you shout, you will most likely make your son angry, not more receptive to your message. Simply make your point by talking quieter or more calmly. You will be surprised how lowering your tone often reengages your listener. Then stop talking, and wait for another opportunity to discuss the topic, if necessary.

10. Know when to keep quiet. If you want to have quality conversations with your son, learn to discern when is the best time to speak. Don’t try to get your son to engage in a meaningful discussion when he is in front of his peers, hungry, or excessively tired.

Waiting for the best opportunity to talk to your son will allow your words to find their way into his heart, rather than get lost in a quarrel. Proverbs 14:33 says, “Wisdom rests in the heart of him who has understanding, But what is in the heart of fools is made known.” One Bible

⁴ Dr. Howard Hendricks, *Teaching to Change Lives* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1987), 72.

scholar explains that passage in this way: “Wisdom is quietly preserved in the heart of the wise for the time of proper use, while fools are eager to blurt out their folly.”⁵

If you, like me, experience mood swings brought on by hormonal changes, learn to hold your tongue until your levels are back to normal. The Bible says, “He who has knowledge spares his words. And a man of understanding is of calm spirit. Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace. When he shuts his lips he is considered perceptive”(Proverbs 18:27-28).

When my words were influenced by mood swings, I most always played the fool. In keeping my mouth quiet, there was at least some hope that my children would consider me perceptive rather than a raving lunatic!

Even in the best of circumstances, there will be times when your words are not well received. That doesn't mean you should keep quiet to avoid *any* conflict. Although what you say may upset your son, you are still responsible to give him direction in life. The Bible promises if you “correct your son, he will give you rest. Yes, he will give delight to your soul” (Proverbs 29:17). The opposite is also true. If you ignore correcting your son, he may one day break your heart.

To ensure your words will have the greatest possible influence on your son, make sure you are walking in obedience to Christ. This discipline will make you sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading, and that will help you to know when is the proper time to talk to your son about important issues.

11. Discern the depths of your son's thoughts. The goal of good communication is not simply to be heard, but to know your listener so you can figure out how to speak such that he

⁵ *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), Proverbs 14:33.

will understand and apply your message. To perceive your son's deepest thoughts, carefully listen to what he is *really* saying. As he speaks, ask the Lord to give you insight into the issues your son may be contemplating.

In their book *Instructing a Child's Heart*, Tedd and Margy Tripp encourage parents to carefully understand what their child is trying to say before responding with instruction or advice:

Listening carefully to what your children are saying, and even to what they are not saying, will induce you to frame your words in ways that facilitate conversation. Without understanding, you may speak to an issue they do not even think about and may miss the things most on their minds.⁶

When you take time to search out the depths of your son's thoughts, you can encourage his right attitudes and train him from Scripture how to correct his wrong thinking. Teaching your son to ask the Lord to help him discern his own heart through the lens of Scripture will prepare him to walk in obedience to the Lord, even after he leaves your home (see Hebrews 4:12-13).

12. Impart wisdom with kindness. Would your son describe you as a kind woman? Do you think if you are too nice your words will lose their authority? Do you rely on harsh words to get your son to respond? Or do you react defensively?

If you answer defensively your son will not talk to you, so learn to recognize when you are becoming oversensitive. You can teach your son with kindness when you train him with the authority of God's wisdom. Learn from the example of the Proverbs 31 mother, who "opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness" (Proverbs 31:26).

⁶ Tedd & Margy Tripp *Instructing a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, PN: Shepherd Press, 2008), 176.

Proverbs 16:24 reminds us “pleasant words are like honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones.” The very next verse says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but the end is the way of death” (Proverbs 16:25).

Could it be that the writer of Proverbs 16 is warning us, “If you insist on doing things your own way, in this case by refusing to use pleasant words, you will follow a path of destruction?”

If you habitually speak harshly to your son, he will likely go elsewhere for advice. And if those other advisors he finds do not base their instruction in God’s truth, they will likely lead your son down a road to ruin. How much better to direct your son to God’s path by lovingly instructing him from Scripture?

Colossians 4:6 says, “Let your speech *always* be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each other.” When your words are seasoned with grace they will create a thirst in your son for Jesus, the Living Water (see John 4:10-13).

13. Ask forgiveness. If you tend to react emotionally to your son’s infractions, your words may be sinful and unrestrained. Carelessly going on and on about an issue will do little to train your son. Proverbs 10:19 warns, “In a number of words sin is not lacking.”

If you do react to your son in an unseemly manner, then ask him to forgive you. He will appreciate your transparency. Be sure to take responsibility for your sinful actions without turning the blame on him. Saying something like, “Son, I am sorry I yelled at you, but you just made me so mad,” is *not* an apology. And your son will not be moved to forgive you. He will likely be put off by your blaming him for your inability to control your emotions. And your model will teach your son to likewise blame others for his bad behavior.

When you humbly ask forgiveness, your son will learn not only how to forgive, but also to take responsibility for his own actions when he apologizes to others.

14. Get wisdom from the Bible. Proverbs 4:5-7 says gaining wisdom should be the key pursuit in life: “Get wisdom! Get understanding!...Love her and she will keep you. Wisdom is the principal thing. Therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting get understanding.”

If you rely on the world’s teachings about child rearing, or ignore your responsibility to prepare yourself with biblical knowledge, your words will not carry the weight of godly wisdom, and in fact may be reckless. Proverbs 15:2 says, “The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly, but the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness.” As you gain God’s wisdom and understanding, you will be prepared to provide wise instruction to your son and direct him to the gospel of grace.

15. Remember your assignment. The Lord’s mandate to you is to daily, deliberately, and diligently teach your son truth from God’s Word. In her book *A Woman After God’s Own Heart*, Elizabeth George writes:

In Deuteronomy 6:6-7, God says this to parents: “These words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.” First a mother and father fill their own hearts with God’s Word (verse 6) and then they *deliberately* and *diligently* teach their children every minute of every day (verse 7) (emphasis added).⁷

⁷ Elizabeth George, *A Woman After God’s Own Heart* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1997), 100.

Ruth Graham, the late wife of evangelist Billy Graham and mother of the internationally known evangelist Franklin Graham, had this to say about her role as a mother:

To me, [motherhood is] the nicest, most rewarding job in the world, second in importance to none, not even preaching... Maybe it is preaching!⁸

In her lifetime, Ruth Graham's resolution to "preach" to her children and grandchildren prepared them to proclaim the gospel to the next generation. Will you share in Mrs. Graham's resolve? Will you deliberately, diligently, and daily look for opportunities to "preach" God's truth to your son?

CONVERSATIONS THAT MATTER

Having the courage to initiate difficult conversations is important. But if you have not developed a habit of talking to your son, where should you begin?

A great way to inspire your son to talk is to ask him something like, "If you could ask me any question right now, what would it be?" Be prepared for anything. You never know what your son might say! He may ask about something you are ready and willing to discuss, or he may ask, "Where do babies come from?"

One day when Brandon was in fifth grade, he surprised me and asked, "Mom, what's sex?" At that time Brandon came seeking answers to the age-old question, Steve was at work. I tried to say something that would hold him off until his father came home, but Brandon would not have it. I took a breath, whispered a prayer for wisdom, and sat down to reply to Brandon's questions about procreation.

⁸ Ruth Graham, quoted by Elizabeth George in *A Woman After God's Own Heart* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1997), 102.

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At first, I went about explaining the act of intercourse like a junior high school biology teacher. I was quite pleased with myself as I finished the conversation. I was confident that Brandon now understood *how* babies were made. However, my usually quiet little guy was exceptionally talkative and inquisitive when it came to this topic. He asked why an unmarried woman we knew had become “pregnant by accident.”

So then I had to explain how God created sex not only for procreation, but also as a pleasurable experience for husband and wife to enjoy. I shared with Brandon how the world exploits the sexual experience God had intended for married people. I explained how men sometimes have sex with women they do not love, or do not want to marry, simply because of the pleasure sex provides. But any sexual relationship outside of the marriage bed is disobedience to God, and is sin.

I told Brandon, “Sometimes an unmarried woman will have sex with a man because she loves him, and wants him to love her. When a woman gives herself to a man who is not committed to her, she often feels used and rejected.” I continued, “Consider how one of your sisters would feel if a man ever used her in that way.” Brandon agreed that a godly man would never do such a thing.

Our conversation went on for some time. At the end of it, Brandon and I bowed beside my bed, where I encouraged him to pray and ask God to help him remain sexually pure for marriage, and to pray for the purity of the woman he would one day marry.

When I thought Brandon was coming to the end of his prayer, he said, “Oh, and Lord, please protect my sisters from any boys ever using them for sex. And help them to be virgins when they get married.” (Even now those words bring a tear to my eyes.)

Because Brandon heard about sex from me, I was able to help him see how women feel about sex, and the effect immorality has upon them. And Brandon learned to value a woman's purity as well. How precious that Brandon comprehended not only the need to obey the Lord with *his* sexuality, but also the need to never to be a man who used women for sexual pleasure.

Since that day, Brandon and I have had many discussions about girls, dating, and sex. With an ethical, reverent attitude, Steve and I together have been privileged to help Brandon develop a biblical view of sexuality. Brandon says he has been thankful for my female perspective on the subject.

If when Brandon was young I had danced around and avoided answering his questions about sex, I might have sent him the message, "Mom's not comfortable talking to you about sex, so don't ever bring it up again." If I had succumb to my discomfort about discussing the subject with Brandon, I might have never had another opportunity to speak to him on this all-too-important issue.

DON'T BE NAIVE

If you and other godly adults in your son's life are reluctant to have transparent discussions with him about sex, he will end up going to other sources for information. The message he picks up from teachers, peers, music, and the media will likely teach him that sex before marriage is acceptable. Don't be naive about how the world's philosophy regarding sex can influence your son. Your input is vital!

At every turn, the world has a casual attitude about sex. If all you do to help your son remain pure through his adolescent years is try to shelter him from exposure to sexual immorality, you will have taught him nothing. It is your job to influence your son's perceptions

and understanding so that he can go out into the world prepared to stand against sexual seduction. Having open communication with your son when he asks questions or faces temptation will provide you with opportunities to teach him God's views about sex.

When your son shows interest in a girl, don't tell him, "You're too young to like a girl." Rather, talk with him about his feelings. Acknowledge the girl is lovely, and that she should be honored as God's creation. Rather than scold your son for admiring her beauty, help him learn to have God-honoring thoughts about the girl.

If you chastise your son for being attracted to the opposite sex, you will not discourage his attraction. What's more, you will likely not hear from him when he shows interest in a girl in the future, because he will not want to be made to feel guilty. How much better it is for you to be involved in this normal part of his life growing up and helping him to discern God's perspective about sex versus Satan's distortion of it.

One of the best ways to expose your son to a biblical view of sexual intimacy is to involve him in a church youth group in which he will learn the whole counsel of God from the Bible. When the youth leaders support a scriptural basis for sexual purity, that will help sow seeds of virtue in your son's mind. If the majority of your son's social activities are church-based, he is likely to make friends with other kids who are learning the same values, and whose parents hold to scriptural standards as well. You would be wise to establish relationships with parents who will join with you in providing supervised fellowship for your children.

Mom, your example in the area of sexual purity is vital. I know I talked about this earlier in the book, but I cannot stress enough the damage a mother's sexual immorality has upon her son. If you have sex outside of marriage, not only will your sin likely cause your son to stumble

in the area of his own purity, but your sin will quench the Spirit in your life and your parenting will be done in the flesh—and not by the power of the Holy Spirit working through you. No matter what the culture says, be not deceived “you will reap what you sow” if you sow seeds of immorality (see Galatians 6:7-9).

Do not be naive about how strong a teenager boy’s sexual drive can be. Allowing him to be alone with a girl in a secluded place is most definitely a recipe for indiscretion. In his immaturity, your son will likely believe he can contain his sexual passions. Teach him how even godly people can fall into sexual temptation by reading to him the Bible’s account of David and Bathsheba (see 1 Samuel 11).

Satan is a roaring lion seeking whomever he can devour. So train your son to defend himself against immorality by submitting to God laws, resisting situations that might cause him to succumb to sexual temptation, and drawing near to God (see 1 Peter 5:8; James 4:7-8).

WHAT’S AT STAKE?

You and your son must understand just how serious sexual immorality is. It dishonors Christ and quenches the Spirit in his life. When your son is not being Spirit-led, he becomes vulnerable to Satan’s deceptions and prone to succumb to sin and evil.⁹

Proverbs 11:18-19 promises, “He who pursues righteousness will have a sure reward, as righteousness leads to life.” For an example of how God honors righteous living, share with your son about Joseph. When Joseph, who was a slave in Egypt, was sexually seduced by the wife of his master, he literally ran away from her. Because of Joseph’s faithful obedience and his pursuit of purity, the Lord eventually made him second in command over Egypt.¹⁰ Help your son make

⁹ Proverbs 11:19.

¹⁰ Genesis 39:1-12; 41:40.

the connection that just as the Lord rewarded Joseph who lived righteously, God will care for and lead your son if he obeys the Lord and resists sexual temptations.

YOUR WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY

As a mother, you have the wonderful opportunity to teach your son how to talk about the important issues of life. Do all you can to establish an environment conducive to good conversations by asking good questions, being a good listener, and speaking God's wisdom to him in a kind and loving manner.

The more you let God's Word dwell richly in you and you walk in obedience to the Lord, the better prepared you will be to have meaningful discussions with your son. When you are equipped with wisdom from God's Word, the Spirit will enable you to listen to your son and to speak to him in ways that honor the Lord, and draw your son to hear His truth.

THINKING IT THROUGH

1. What two virtues does Proverbs 4:7 teach us to go after? Name one way you will pursue them.

LIVING IT OUT

This chapter listed 15 steps to establishing a better dialogue with your son. Write out the steps that most spoke to you, and how you will apply them this week to your relationship with your son.