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**The Fourth “R” of Schooling for Our Kids**

**Jonathan C. Robinson, Ph.D.**

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**The Fourth “R” of Schooling for Our Kids**

We send our kids to school with the expectation that they learn ‘Reading, ‘Riting, and ‘Rithmetic. Those are the three “R’s” of education that our children receive in their formal schooling. But what about the fourth “R?” Where do our children learn about Relationship?

The short answer is, everywhere. We cannot not be in relationship. We are always relating to others, in a good, bad, or indifferent way. Our kids relate to their siblings, peers, teachers, other grown-ups in authority. However, as their parents, we need to be the primary source of relationship skills and need fulfillment.

In developmental psychology, we know that our children get 80% of their personality and character traits from us directly, as a result of their interaction (i.e., relationship) with us, by the time they reach age 5. From age 5 to 15, their peer group adds their spin that accounts for 15% of our children’s personality and character development. Only 5% of who our children become is original with them. As parents, we have the lion’s share of influence on who our children become.

Teaching our children how to relate to others is the primary focus of their development in their first five years. We provide the “Fourth R” in our child’s education.

It is true that we cannot not communicate. Our communication with our children IS our relationship with them. So how best to communicate with our children?

In **Teachable Moments: Building Blocks of Christian Parenting**, I outline four types of positive communication with our children. It’s a typical day at your house. Everything is in order and running smoothly. In these relatively problem-free circumstances, you have the opportunity to use positive communication tools. You can DIRECT your child. “Hey, son, it’s time to come in. Dinner’s ready.” You can also INSTRUCT your child. “Let me show you how to bait that hook.” You can CHECK-IN with your child. “Hey, buddy, what’s up?” and you can find TEACHABLE MOMENTS with your child. “You know, when I was your age, I had a best friend also. We still are. Wanna know how we’ve done it all these years?”

Additionally, when your child is showing problem behavior, ACTIVE LISTENING is your go-to communication tool.

Consider when your child is running a fever. You make him comfortable. Perhaps some hot chicken noodle soup. You tend to him until his fever comes back down to normal. When he is showing problem behavior, it’s like he’s running an emotional fever. Active listening brings the emotional fever down.

Simply put, try to say back to your child what you think he’s feeling at the moment. “You feel sad.” “You’re frustrated.” Any comment you make to him that begins with “You feel…” is active listening. Now, saying “you feel…” over and over again can get tedious for you and your child. So, you vary what you say and do.

Four versions on the theme of Active Listening increase your efforts to bring his emotional fever down. You can use PASSIVE LISTENING, also, known as simply being quiet and attentive as he talks. You can use PARROTTING, which is saying back to him the exact words he just spoke. You can PARAPHRASE what he just said, which is focusing on the content, rather than on the feelings. And, you can employ a NON-COMMITTAL RESPONSE. This is what shrinks are famous for. An NCR takes the form of “Uh huh.” “I see.” “Hmmm.”

Each of these variations of active listening conveys the message that you are trying to understand what your child’s problem is, and how he’s feeling in the moment. Additionally, active listening reinforces your child’s abilities to handle his situation in helpful ways. You always have his back, but you want to nurture his working out his problems himself.

When his emotional fever comes down, and his feelings are heard and understood, if he gets stuck in the problem-solving, you can add your thoughts. However, always ask permission. “You know, I’ve got some ideas about how to handle your situation. Wanna hear them?” Asking permission conveys respect for your child and helps him learn how to handle difficulties.

Several cautions in the process of Active Listening. First, don’t solve the problem for your child. While potentially effective in the short run and time efficient, your hidden message to your child is, “You really are so dumb, immature, and incompetent that I need to solve this one for you. Get out of my way.”

Second, don’t judge, criticize, or rebuke your child in need or in conflict. Doing so would shift your focus from her feelings to her behavior. She would get no benefit from such a response, and she would likely feel shamed.

Third, don’t minimize your child’s upset, or make it about you. You may be trying to ease her hurt feelings, but you run the risk of her feeling small, insecure, and insignificant.

The fourth “R” of schooling is “Relationship.” You are the most important and influential person in your child’s life. Teach your child how to relate well with others by using the four kinds of positive communication and by active listening her when her emotional fever is running high.