



Parenting and Marriage:

Staying Connected with your Spouse through Seasons of Parenting

Prioritizing Your Marriage Honors Christ

As life moves forward, we naturally become focused on what is immediate. This can lead to secondary things becoming our primary focus (*Matt. 13:22*). Our marriage relationship is to be next only to our relationship with Christ. When we focus on our marriage relationship, the Scripture says we honor Christ (*Eph. 5:31-33*).

Being a parent can be an all-consuming role which can affect these priorities. It requires time, energy, and focus, and it can often become the primary focus in life. Parenting is an important role and one God instructs us to take very seriously (*Deut. 6:4-9*). We are to purposefully engage in the task of parenting our children. Above all, we are to point our children to Christ and instruct them in truth (*Eph. 6:4*). This charge alone often feels like a daunting task for which there is not enough time, energy or wisdom. We need God's grace and wisdom to keep proper perspective and to balance our limited resources among the relationships in our lives. We must find a way to prioritize our marital relationship so it is not neglected or overshadowed by our other responsibilities.

Marriage and Parenting

All marriages go through seasons where a couple's time and energy gets pulled in different directions. Going from being a married couple to being parents is one example of where a couple's world dramatically shifts. This is often an exciting time until midnight feedings and diaper-changing take their toll. Then as the child grows, challenges often shift to tasks like completing homework, enforcing curfews, and seeing an adult child make different choices than we would desire. In addition to these challenges of differing parenting seasons, different backgrounds and families of origin can be used by Satan to create division in the marital relationship between spouses. The couple who does not focus on staying connected while walking through these different parenting seasons will naturally drift apart. No matter if you feel your relationship is currently on solid ground or struggling for air, it is never a bad time to evaluate your marriage and commit to work toward connection and growth.

Below are a few areas to focus on to help strengthen your marriage during all seasons of life:

- Know your spouse (what they appreciate, what they don't appreciate, their dreams, their interests, etc.)
What will you do or not do this week to act on this knowledge and show appreciation toward your spouse?
Deal with conflict openly and respectfully. Do you tend to get silent or aggressive when conflict arises?
How will you work on respectful dialogue?
- Spend time together, alone and with others.
 - Spend time alone with your spouse. (10 minutes daily, 2 hours monthly, overnight quarterly)
 - Spend time with same sex friends without your spouse. (2 hours a month)
- Engage in non-sexual touch. Hug, kiss, hold hands, sit next to each other, etc.

- Encourage each other in your walk with the Lord by engaging in spiritual disciplines together.
 - Pray and read the Word together.
 - Discuss what you learned from a sermon.
- Do an activity together. Find a hobby, chore, ministry, exercise, etc. you both enjoy.
- Laugh together. Take time to share the small blessings the Lord has given you.
- Build a strong support system. Invite two couples over for supper in the next two weeks.
- Talk about sexual intimacy. Ask your spouse what they think/feel about your sexual relationship.

Parenting Seasons

All couples run into challenges during different seasons of parenting. The seasons below highlight a few common challenges which can hinder our relationship with Christ as well as with our spouse. Consider the challenges of each season and how to take purposeful action toward growing relationships with Christ and as a couple.

Young Children (ages 0-2)

Common Challenges: Shifting from being a couple to having someone we must provide constant care for is difficult. Add to this scenario the frustration of lack of sleep, battles around eating, husbands who are not as attuned to a child's needs, wives healing from pregnancy and birth, husbands not getting as much of their spouse's attention, and so on. This is often an exhausting season of marriage where couples can easily start to drift apart.

Consider: Fathers, identify one way to help your spouse each evening to show appreciation and allow her to take a break. Mothers, purposefully express appreciation for your husbands, making sure the newborn is not the only focus.

Children (ages 3-12)

Common Challenges: As children get older, they do not demand as much of our focus but still require attention. During this season, parents should see the need for children to gain understanding and wisdom while children will be starting to think they do not need help from Mom and Dad. Life can get very busy with school, extracurricular activities, friends, and so on. It is important to not overly feed this busyness but to set appropriate boundaries for our children. In this busyness, it is often difficult to find time to engage our children in biblical truth through family worship, teach them about God's design for sex, instruct on appropriate technology use, and other such important topics. This can also lead to marriages which are starved for time.

Consider: Spouses, schedule a monthly date night for just the two of you. During this time, make a point to focus your conversation on things other than your children. Ensure your schedules are not too busy with other commitments to allow for such regular time together. Also take time together to develop a purposeful plan for instructing your children on topics such as use of technology, God's design for sex, money management, what it means to be a good friend, how to serve others, etc. Then carry out the plan together.

Teens (ages 13-18)

Common Challenges: These are the last few years before our children are considered adults. This season of parenting is about preparing teenagers to be ready to enter the adult world. There are often challenges during this season as teens want to be treated as adults, but they do not yet have the maturity or experience to be adults. It can also be a challenge to balance giving them freedom while appropriately limiting activities and peer interaction. Parents can feel put to one side during a season of life when we know our teens need us. Handling these challenges when there are not clear cut answers can leave parents feeling like they are fighting with each other as much as with their teen.

Consider: Identify a mentor couple who can provide feedback and encouragement as you raise teenagers. This is helpful as you seek to strike a balance between granting additional freedom while keeping protective boundaries in place. Take time to pray together and trust the Lord to work in your teen's heart as they fight for freedom and make mistakes. Focus on walking through conflict with your spouse and teen in a way which honors Christ. Reflect on the last time you had a heart to heart discussion with your teenager and purpose to maintain this level of dialogue with them.

Adult Children

Common Challenges: It is difficult to see an adult child make decisions with which we do not agree. Yet we no longer have the ability to "make" them do what we see as right or wise. Even when adult children make wise decisions, it can be difficult to watch them gain greater independence and no longer seem to need our guidance. This can be a difficult time for marriages, especially if a couple has not invested in the relationship throughout the years. It can be easy to drift apart or even become frustrated with each other during earlier parenting seasons. Now, as less time and energy is spent on the children, a void in marital relationships can be exposed.

Consider: Reevaluate hopes, dreams, and desires together as a couple. Where do you want to invest time and energy as a couple and as individuals? Think about friendships you would like to establish or reestablish and how you should go about strengthening your support group. Are there opportunities for ministry which have now opened up in this new season of life?

Conclusion

Keeping a marriage strong through different seasons of life will take purposeful thought and action. The effort might seem heavy up front, but the reward of purposefully working to maintain a marriage relationship is great. We glorify God as we strengthen our marriages. Take time this week to discuss and develop a plan to grow closer to your spouse.

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ACCFS has a host of resources available to encourage parents in their responsibilities. We continue to conduct *Parenting with a Purpose* seminars and other presentations as requested. In addition, we develop and refer to other helpful resources on our website at www.accounseling.org/parenting. If you have requests or would like more information, please contact ACCFS at (309)263-5536.