

For those of you who are parents, do you ever wonder how you are doing?

Someone once said, "Raising children is like playing golf. You keep thinking you are going to get better."

Someone else said, "Parenting would be easier if my children were better at childing."

A mother once heard a startling scream from her four-year-old son. She rushed into the playroom to see what was happening. There he sat while his baby sister yanked his hair with all her might.

"Oh, honey, don't be too upset," said his mother trying to comfort him. "She just doesn't know that this hurts you."

Once the little boy calmed down, the mother returned to what she was doing in another room. Only to be interrupted again by a sharp screaming, this time by her little daughter. Once more she rushed into the playroom. This time she asked her son, "What is wrong with your sister?"

"Nothing much," he said. "Except now she knows how much it hurts to have her hair pulled."

Ahh parenting. It just is not easy, is it? I remember the first time I became a parent. All of a sudden I didn't feel quite so prepared to be one. Do you know the feeling?

When my children were in that terrible two timeframe, I noticed all the people who told me that that was their favorite age for children, didn't have children that age anymore. Now, that my children are grown and moving out onto their own, I am discovering how much easier problems were to solve when the children were two. The older children get, the more challenging it is to solve their problems.

Today we are beginning a new sermon series. It is called *Building a Healthy Family*. Today, we are going to talk about

Strategies for Children to Get Along. And we are beginning by looking at what not to do.

In our scripture, we read about Jacob and Esau. Twin brothers who were as different as night and day. The mother favored the youngest, Jacob. The Father favored the eldest, Esau. And one problem followed after another.

On the very short list of what not to do if we want our children to get along, begins with:

1. *Don't play favorites*. Your children will see this. They will feel this. They will resent you and their siblings because of it.
2. *Don't reward tattletales*. When one child comes to you with reports of their sibling's dastardly deeds, reflect their feelings and encourage them to work it out.
3. *Don't pick on your children incessantly*. They will begin to wonder if you really care about them or love them. It is okay to laugh and have fun with them, but we don't have to put them down to have fun with them.

In our scripture for today, Esau and Jacob never do end up getting along. As this story unfolds we see other problems caused by the parenting of these two children. Because of the favoritism played amongst these children, we see how they end up growing up and really struggling. They struggle to believe in themselves. They struggle with resentment toward each other and their families. They struggle with fears of the future. And their difficulties in their family cause them to struggle in terms of their relationship with God. Unfortunately, they are not a terrific example of a healthy family.

But are there examples of healthy families in the Bible? Yes, there are. But in all honesty, there are many, many more examples of unhealthy families. If we are going to help build healthy families, it is going to be real important for us to build into our lives certain principles. When it comes to raising children, consider some of the following things to do:

1. *Develop an atmosphere of mutual respect.* This means doing things like talking to your children about using proper manners, learning to compromise, talking with each other. It means helping them to understand that, name-calling, and violence don't solve problems and need to be avoided.
2. *When a fight breaks out between children, monitor the fight and assess the proper response.* No one issue is ever black and white and the roots of the fight are often long and tangled. And if you ask your kids what is going on, you'll never get an unbiased answer and most of the time you will be put in the middle and have to choose sides. Instead, label each situation on a four-point scale of dangerousness.
 - ✚ **One-point** (harmless fighting) avoid getting in the middle.
 - ✚ **Two-point** (semi-serious) help define the problem, encourage them to talk about it and then leave the room.
 - ✚ **Three-point** (rapidly escalating) assesses the degree of potential danger and reminds your kid's to be respectful.
 - ✚ **Four-point** (dangerous situation) requires adult intervention, by separating each child and imposing consequences.
3. *Avoid playing the fairness game.* Treat your children as individuals and address each of their qualities and characteristics uniquely.
4. *Teach your kids problem-solving skills.* Give them guidelines and skills to solve problems for themselves. When something happens, ask them, "What could you have done differently? Help them come up with several different ways they could have responded and then ask them, "of all these ways we have thought of, what do you think would have been a better response than what you did do?"
5. *Use prevention as your best defense.* Since most fighting is a way to get attention. Make sure you incorporate special time with each child. Set up schedules to make yourself available to each of your kids. You can even have your child go on special outings with you.

As a parent, the special outing that I did with each of my children is that I took them out for breakfast. When they got into the sixth grade, we would go out for breakfast, just one on one. My children with me.

I chose breakfast, because it fit best into my schedule and because it is often one of the most inexpensive meals you can have out to eat. My children and I often sought out restaurants where we could both eat for between \$5 and \$10.

These times of breakfast, eventually became great opportunities for me to visit with my daughters and with my son. We would talk about important values to me. We would talk about politics and events taking place in the world. We would talk about their issues and their friendships.

It was a great space to connect and just get to know each other. To this day, when my children are around, we look for opportunities to get together to have breakfast, one on one.

If I could give any advice to parents, it would certainly include these things we have talked about. But it would also include this one last thing, the most important thing we can do, when children come into our life, is to be a parent. Take it seriously. Have fun doing it. Make it a priority for your life. Your kids will appreciate it, someday.

May God help us live, lives of faith.

Amen