

STEP BY STEP



TO EFFECTIVE PARENTING

Guide to Building
a Healthy
Marriage Relationship.

By

Lynn Johnston

About Step by Step

Parenting is both an exciting and challenging journey. Having a child to love, nurture, and encourage is a blessing. However the journey is filled with challenges which are sometimes puzzling and at other times frustrating. This booklet and others in the series are designed to help you sort through the steps in helping a child grow and develop to reach her fullest potential.

Each booklet contains core information on parenting attitudes, skills and abilities. There are activities to work through to help in applying each strategy. While the booklets contain information which can lead to more effective parenting, it may not answer all the questions a parent might have in the area presented. It is therefore recommended that each and every parent join the thousands of other parents in the journey for lifelong learning. Parenting is a step by step learning process.

We invite you to read all our titles and join us in one of our many different training sessions. We look forward to walking together with you step by step to effective parenting!

Sincerely,

Ruby M. Johnston

President, International Leadership and Development Center

Founder, LAMb International

© LAMb International – 2008 All Rights Reserved

GUIDE TO BUILDING A HEALTHY MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP

Marriages are 'made in heaven' is a common expression. The challenge for parents lies in the reality of living a marriage here on earth. With a success rate around 50% in the western world and only 25% in some developing countries, marriage has gained a reputation as something of convenience that can easily be discarded through divorce when it becomes inconvenient.

I don't know of any couple, when reciting their marriage vows, who are already planning for divorce. People getting married fully expect the marriage to work. They are looking forward to a life of happiness together - forever.

The fact is either your marriage is getting better or it is getting worse. Belief in a perfect static state of blissful marriage is an illusion. A good marriage takes work – a great marriage takes continued hard work.

Yet, even with determined effort, marriages fail. Why? There are many complex answers to this question; however, it is clear that many marriages could be saved and many others could improve, if the husband and wife had a clear understanding of and a willingness to implement the fundamentals of a successful satisfying marriage. The goal of this booklet is to outline some of those basic fundamentals.

The next few pages of this guide contain the following fundamental principles for a satisfying marriage.

- The Spiritual Connection
- Commitment
- Communication

- Understanding Ourselves and Others
- Financial Stability



THE SPIRITUAL CONNECTION

The same biblical foundation that has enabled wonderful, healthy marriages in the past, still builds successful satisfying marriages today. One key to a deeply satisfying marriage is the understanding of the biblical basis for the husband's or wife's role and responsibility. Whether or not you have involved God in the foundation of your marriage is an issue of personal choice, nonetheless the Bible has a great deal to say about love.

Love is a foundational principle in our marriages, but love alone will not satisfy our want for an excellent marriage. Some of the characteristics of true love outlined in the Bible are: patience, kindness, rejoicing with truth, always protecting, trusting, hoping and persevering. These are clearly behaviors, and as such can be learned.

Often we don't recognize the necessity of learning to love in our marriages. Many men learn behaviors for competition, winning, sex, and 'bringing home the bacon'. In a like fashion, many women have learned behaviors relating to nurturing. Sincere love; however, is something that takes time to learn. When you realize that love is a behavior choice, not an emotion, you will understand that "husbands/wives love..." is not a duty but rather an ongoing challenge for growth and an opportunity to be part of the privilege of marriage. A successful satisfying marriage is not a destination, but a journey. It is an ongoing process involving daily choices and self-evaluation, where we each determine the degree of responsibility we're willing to accept. If you have a spouse, then you have the privilege of being part of the marriage journey.

Love is a choice. It is a choice in the way we behave. A strong biblical marriage is a behavior choice. A choice you are free to make. Loving my spouse does not mean simply feeling mushy emotions welling up in my heart. Love implies giving to my spouse; serving him/her. Are you willing to make that choice and accept the blessings that accompany such a choice?

1. Do you permit your love to never end?
2. Are you confident that your feelings and ideas matter?
3. Are you conscientious in your marriage role?
4. Are you committed to making effective choices for your marriage?



COMMITMENT

Marriage should be a commitment forever. This booklet is intended as a tool to strengthen the commitment for couples. For those who are happily married, for couples who are experiencing difficulties, and for those contemplating marriage, this booklet has information and tools for building and maintaining a successful, satisfying marriage.

A Dynamic Marriage is not static. Believing you can reach the ideal or perfect marriage and then you stay there is a great misconception. The reality is either your marriage is improving or it is getting worse.

Marriage is about doing. Marriage is not about trying. Trying is a failure word. Do something or do not do something. Commitment to a marriage is about doing something! In order to succeed at marriage we must continually be doing things to nurture and grow our relationship.

Commitment means taking the time, energy and patience to respectfully work out problems, sharing in the good times and persevering in the more difficult times. We have been blessed with the ability to choose. Once in a while we do something which may offend our spouse. Commitment means working through those offenses. How we work through those difficulties is not something we are generally taught. We learn some of these skills from our parents or other marriage role models. Often we learn behaviors which do not help solve the problem but can create more problems. If the behavior doesn't work, then do something different. Repeating the same pattern of behavior will only provide the same result. If you keep doing what you're doing then you will get what you got. If you want something different, do something different. That something different may be to focus on "us", not just "me".

"Us" is your marriage; the union of a husband and wife. "Me", on the other hand, is your self; your personal wants without regard to others. Marriage is not just about self: Me is important, but us is more important if the marriage is to survive. Commitment requires taking action for the marriage, not just for me.

Self-evaluation is critical to marriage commitment. Self-evaluation is hard to do. Self-evaluation is having the ability to assess your behavior against your desired goal and vision. Is what you are doing helping you get what you want?

In order to self-evaluate you must be able to clearly and honestly look at your actions and decide whether or not those actions are contributing to or working against your marriage satisfaction. Self-evaluation is an ongoing process. The following seven questions provide a discussion format for commitment. Sit together with your spouse and talk about yourself and then listen to your spouse. Discuss what you have in common and record your plans, dreams and goals. Be sure to re-visit this discussion every few months.

1. Who are you?
2. What do you like and dislike?
3. What do you want in the future? Focus on ten years ahead.
4. What are you willing to do to get it?
5. What is your view of marriage?
6. What do you want from marriage?
7. What are you willing to give to a marriage?



COMMUNICATION

Words are a lot like toothpaste: once it's out of the tube, it's virtually impossible to get it back in. The Bible tells us that once words are out of your mouth they have the power to give life or destroy. There's an old saying that contains a great deal of wisdom. It says "engage brain before operating mouth." Or perhaps you have heard, "speak in haste and you will have lots of time to be sorry". Words are like the bit in a horse's mouth. If you can control the bit, you can control the horse.

Most couples are aware of tension in their marriage communication from time to time. This tension can be addressed and better communication patterns can be established.

There are nine fundamental communication problems that hinder a marriage. As you think about each of these, please think about yourself, not your spouse. Each one has the potential of disrupting communication in your marriage. The order of importance should be determined by you and by how much you use each one (self-evaluation). These are:

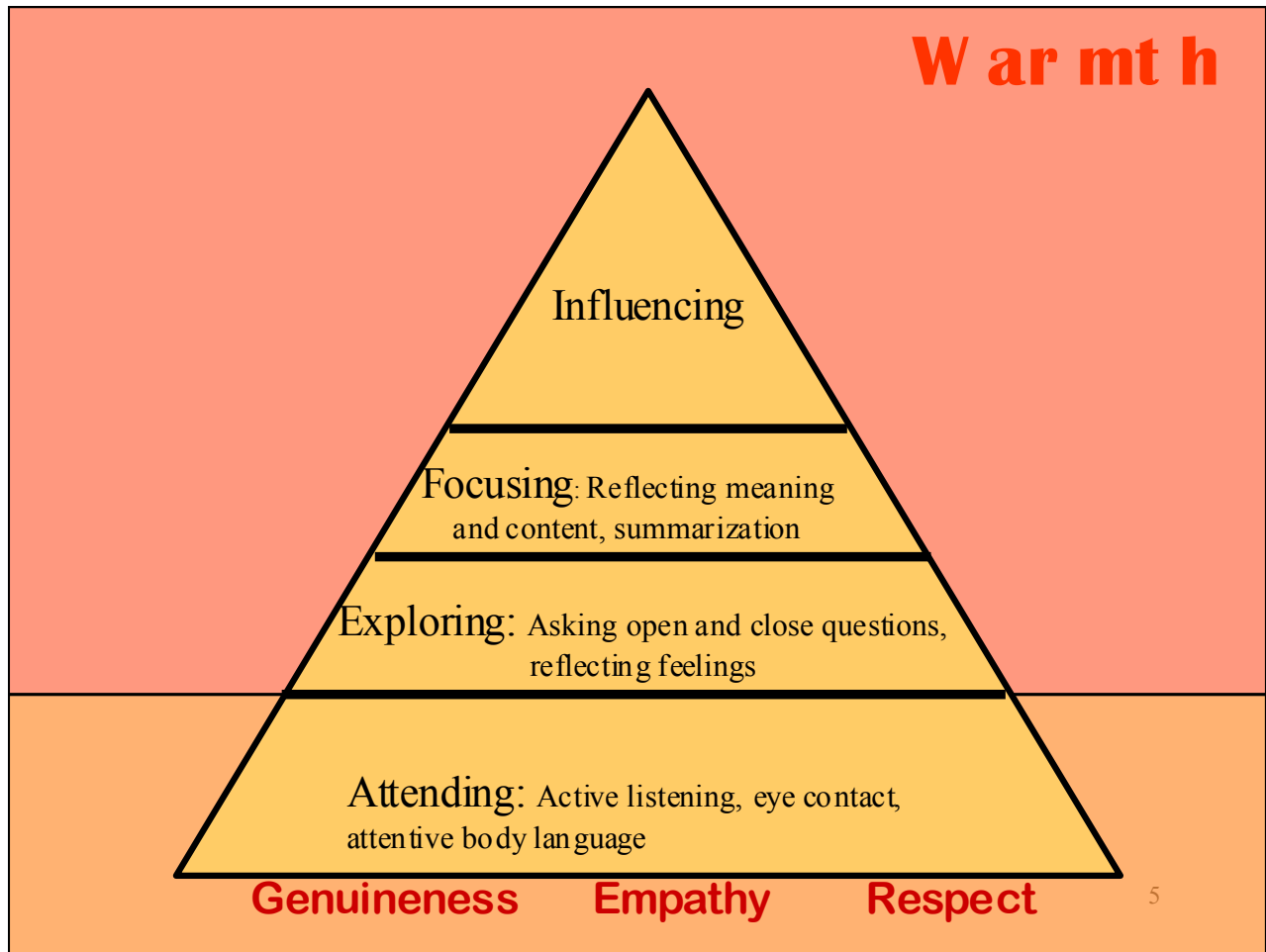
1. speaking before thinking,
2. correcting others,
3. gossiping,
4. complaining ,
5. nagging,
6. babbling,
7. bragging,
8. arguing, and
9. reckless words.

Communication patterns for men and women may be very different. On average men speak 12,500 words a day and women speak over 25,000 words. Of course that depends on the topic and the passion

behind it. What we observe here is a difference, not that one is good or another bad. Both men and women can learn to have meaningful conversations by responding in an effective manner. Effective communication usually means listening, listening and listening. The average person listens only a few seconds before they are looking for an opportunity to interject their thoughts. No longer engaged in listening, they eagerly await an opportunity to speak what's on their minds. Often, and what is on their mind is about self, not us.

If we are to improve our communication, it is critical each spouse respond with warmth, that is with empathy, genuineness and respect.

Consider the following diagram, Steps to Effective Communication. Remember, building a pyramid begins with the base.



The Effective Communication Pyramid leads us to the top, to an area called Influencing. Influencing is where we effectively share information, discuss interpretations and agree on courses of action. Utilizing these steps ensures each spouse an effective voice in sharing their needs and wants. It is foolish and futile to think you can build a solid communication pyramid from the top down. The foundation, the base of the pyramid, is where the work begins. It begins with listening.

In order to build better communication in your marriage, practice this activity with your spouse. Arrange 20 minutes of undisturbed time to sit with your spouse. One person gets 10 minutes to ask questions and listen while the other responds. After 10 minutes, reverse roles. Remember, the person asking the questions should not interject, but only ask questions and listen attentively. This is a great activity to engage in at least once a week as you build an effective communication pyramid.



UNDERSTANDING OURSELVES AND OTHERS

“If only he/she would do what I want.” “You make me so angry.” “Our marriage would be fine if only he/she would” These are all statements we have heard from individuals with respect to marriage difficulties. Notice that the context or focus of each of these statements is on the ‘other’ person. The implication is that people can be controlled by things outside them – by bribery or coercion or some external force. This would lead to the false conclusion that I can make someone else do something or that someone else can make me do something. Unfortunately there are many unhappy marriages

where the spouses spend tremendous energy on intimidation and manipulation in order to get their way.

The truth is we can be influenced by others, but not controlled. We choose to act. Every day we are faced with many choices. Many of those choices may be difficult and may have a direct effect on others. Understanding that we, each of us, are directly responsible for our own decisions is a step in the right direction. Understanding that blame can not be placed on the past, on the environment, on hereditary factors or on anyone else is an essential step to individual responsibility. We are ultimately responsible for our own lives. We can influence others and we can have a strong positive influence on our children, but we cannot control another person.

Many difficulties in marriage can be traced to behaviors we learned while growing up. Some of us learned more effective and responsible behaviors, others learned less effective behaviors. Since behaviors are learned, it stands to reason they can be unlearned and better behaviors chosen and learned. It is not helpful to blame or look back at where we learned the behaviors or even why we choose them. What is helpful and effective is to look ahead at how we are going to change. The challenge is to choose and learn more effective behaviors.

Effective behaviors move us closer to what we want. Less effective behaviors do not. In fact, they are likely to move us further from what we want. The key is in understanding that the only one one you can change/control is yourself.

Start taking control of your own behaviors today by creating personal affirmations statements. These statements should begin "I am" and contain a personal, positive, present tense, emotional and imaginative context. Something like: "I am excited about our walk together" or "I am thrilled with our discussions on marriage".

The only person you can change is you. Start by writing out five affirmation statements:

1. “ I am
2. “ I am
3. “I am
4. “I am
5. “I am



FINANCIAL STABILITY

Financial stability in your marriage means being able to pay your bills at the end of the month. It means having sufficient resources to deal with any financial crisis, It means not having to worry about the necessities of life – food, shelter, clothing and health care. It means having sufficient funds to meet your social, religious and recreational needs.

Financial stability involves learning. It involves communication and awareness. It does not mean we can never spend money. Nor does it mean we cannot dream or wish for things. Financial stability does mean work on the part of both marriage partners. Financial stability requires an understanding that married couples are responsible for the choices they make. These choices determine whether we are successful or unsuccessful in dealing with our finances

Can we really afford this right now? Is it better to wait for another time?” Asking the questions is simple, but following through on your decision is hard to do. Making the difficult choice and following

through is what assists in maintaining financial stability. It also helps build stable marriages without undue financial stress. Making the difficult choice is about increasing your communication to build awareness that helps avoid financial pitfalls.

It is critical for couples to understand what financial stability means for all aspects of their lives. What is your income, what is your plan for the future and what do you need versus what do you want? Thinking ahead and evaluating the risk of purchasing something helps in the choices we make. It is easy to create a financially desperate situation by our choices. This situation can create intolerable stress in the marriage. It is more difficult, but quite possible, to make choices that ease and remove our financial burdens. Awareness and communication can work to help us maintain financial stability.

Although the accumulation of great wealth will not ensure a successful marriage, the lack of financial stability can create difficulties. Financial stability does not imply a huge bank account or lots of possessions. It does mean that we have a vision for the future and a plan for today. It means as a couple we systematically work our way through all our monetary issues.

One simple rule of financial success would have us spend 70% of what we earn on our living expenses. Of the remaining 30%, 10% goes to the payment of any debts we have. Another 10% we would give away to our church, the homeless, family or friends in need, or other charitable causes. And the final 10% is for permanent savings. This is sometimes referred to as the ten – ten –ten principle of financial success.

Whatever system you use it is critical to regularly talk with your spouse in order to reach and maintain agreement with respect to your financial stability.

The following questions are for consideration and discussion for you and your spouse :

1. Do we have a budget? If not, create one!
2. How much do we save each month?
3. What are our long-term financial commitments?
4. Do we have a dream purchase for the future?
5. Do we discuss, at least once a month, our financial priorities?
6. Do we reconcile our discussions with our present financial reality?
7. What is our plan when we face financial difficulty?



Together Forever

Everyone begins their married life expecting to have a successful, satisfying marriage. However, society has made it acceptable to be a marriage quitter when we are faced with the problems of day-to-day living. Quitting a marriage is a cop-out. Coping out is the inability or unwillingness to manage time, tasks and relationships.

Marriage is hard work. Don't let anyone deceive you, happy successful marriages don't "just happen". They are the result of openness, understanding, good communication, follow through on commitments and a determination to follow a sacred covenant for marriage.

Thinking back over the contents of this booklet, you will realize the magnitude of elements interwoven into the fabric of an excellent marriage. Each of those topics is wound together in your marriage like an intricate fabric. Lose any of the threads and the fabric weakens and eventually unravels.

If your marriage is important, then you must spend the time, energy and resources to make it work –today! Procrastination will only lead to increasingly difficult choices and possible disaster. If you have read this booklet by yourself and believe there's help in it for your marriage, then it's time to involve your spouse. Schedule some time together and get started. Perhaps even read the booklet together. Discuss the questions together. This is a starting point, but the beauty is in the journey. A successful, satisfying marriage is a life journey.

OTHER STEP BY STEP TITLES WITH NUMBERS

1. Understanding Child Development – Birth to Two – “The Infant”
2. Understanding Child Development – Three to Five – “The Preschooler”
3. Understanding Child Development – Six to Eleven – “The School Aged Child”
4. Understanding Child Development – Twelve to Fifteen – “The Young Teen”
5. Understanding Child Development – Sixteen to Eighteen – “The Older Teen”
6. Communication – Responding to Children
7. Communication – Feelings
8. Communication – Asking Children Strength- Focused Questions
9. Communication – Being Direct with Children
10. Communication - The Languages of Love for Your Child
11. Communication – What you Say and How you Say It
12. What Every Parent Should Know About Child Abuse
13. Sharing Secrets and Keeping Surprises – James’s Story
14. Teaching Your Child to Say, “NO” – Jessica’s Story
15. Understanding Childhood Illnesses
16. Caring for a Sick Child
17. Disease and How it Spreads
18. First Aide – What Parents Need to Know
19. Home Safety
20. Childproofing Your Home
21. Teaching Safety
22. Food Safety
23. Foodborn Illness
24. Nutrition
25. Feeding Problems
26. Bringing a Foster Child Into Your Home
27. Understanding the Effects of Fostering on the Family
28. Understanding the Effects of Fostering on the Marriage
29. Guide to Dealing with Stress As a Parent
30. Guide to Building a Healthy Marriage Relationship
31. Bringing our Adopted Child into Our Home
32. Helping Children Understand Adoption
33. Joining With my Adopted Child’s Culture
34. Understanding the Birth Parent of My Child
35. The Blended Family

36. When Family Members Treat My Foster or Adoptive Child Different
37. Understanding Attachment
38. Recreating History for My Adopted Child
39. Helping the Child who has been Sexually Abused
40. Teaching about Sexuality
 - a. How to Talk to Your Child
 - b. How to Talk to Your Parents
41. Understanding Sexual Behaviors
42. Teaching Your Child about Abstinence
43. Talking to your Teen about Identity
44. Contracting with Your Teen About Behavior
45. Developing Responsibility
46. Teaching Your Child to Build Relationships
47. Teaching about Marriage and Family
48. Telling Your Child Someone has Died
49. Understanding the Grieving Cycle
50. Understanding and Approaching Behavior
51. Dealing with Lying
52. Toilet Training and Bedwetting
53. Dealing with Defiance
54. Dealing with Hitting and Biting
55. Dealing with Stealing
56. Dealing with Anger
57. Dealing with Fighting
58. The Child Who Plays With Fire
59. Helping My Child Deal with Fear
60. Helping My Child Kick a Bad Habit
61. Help with Tattling
62. Dealing with the Two Year Old's Temper Tantrum
63. Help with Thumb Sucking
64. Help with Bedtime Problems
65. Dealing with Substance Abuse
66. Understanding Suicide
67. Developing Good Study Habits for School
68. Dealing with Failure
69. Demonstrating Manners
70. Helping Siblings Get Along
71. Nurturing Optimism

MORE TITLES TO BE DEVELOPED IN THE FUTURE