

About Our Children, Q&A—May 2009

Questions for Hope Eliasof, a licensed marriage and family therapist in Midland Park who specializes in relationship issues.

Q: What kind of stress does parenting put on marriage?

A. The important thing is not the stress itself but the meaning that people bring to it. Everybody has to deal with continuing daily hassles, like spilled milk, finding shoes, dealing with children's tantrums, being too busy, but it's how they view them that makes the difference.

Q. What kind of meaning do people sometimes put on those things?

A. Sometimes people attribute their own personal feelings of inadequacy or intentional negativity onto their child or their spouse. When they do this, solutions to their problems are often overlooked, and depression and anger can magnify.

Q. What happens when parents don't have support from each other and from their family and friends?

A. When the marriage isn't working, emotional reactions can overwhelm one or both of the parents. Loneliness, resentment, anger, feelings of helplessness can lead to chronic anxiety and depression.

Q. Are there factors that can counter these reactions?

A. Yes, definitely. Things like a strong value system, a commitment to the marriage, the valuing of the family unit, and the support of friends and family in the religious community.

Q. How can marriage counseling help?

A. Marriage counseling can break the cycle of hopelessness. The two partners begin to learn how to really listen to one another and see their partners in a different light, from different perspectives. Having a third person—the therapist—there provides a forum to help this happen.

Q. How does a bad relationship between parents affect children?

A. If there are power struggles, blame, emotional withdrawal, or feelings of hopelessness—any or all of these—there isn't room for addressing the issues that are vitally important to children, like discipline, and reminders to do their homework, and discussions of how they're going to spend their summers. They just get crowded out by the parents' issues.

Q. Is that the only damage to kids?

A. No, not at all. For example, sometimes one parent will use the child against the other parent, which puts a tremendous burden on the child. She is never free from worry and always looking over her shoulder to make sure the parent is okay. She is unable to trust either parent and doesn't learn healthy limits. If that cycle isn't broken, then she grows up and carries that pattern into her own relationship.

Q. How do you work with parents in a stressful relationship?

A. I help them identify how each of their own histories may be creating unfair expectations for the relationship. The parenting role radically changes the perceptions that one spouse has of the other. And that's greatly impacted by each person's relationships with his own parents. For example, if the wife was raised in a family where the father made all the decisions and "took care" of everything and everyone, she may be waiting for her husband to do something similar. Whereas he may be expecting her to pull her fair share of the load of responsibility, because that's what his mother did. The same thing may be true about discipline techniques, dealing with money, sex, and other issues.

Q. What typically happens to the family unit when a couple starts working through these things in therapy?

A. When the marriage is taken care of, when they stop working against one another and start working as a team together, then they feel better about the marriage. And they're able to start taking care of the family again. There are fewer distractions, less fighting, which allows them to focus on their children's needs.

Q. So what's the real benefit of marriage counseling?

A. It provides a safe space for people to learn to listen to one another, an opportunity for them to become more open with their feelings, to learn more realistic expectations for the relationship, and to stop disconnecting with their spouse. When the therapist begins to respond to one parent in a different way, the other spouse starts to see that person in a different way as well. It changes the dynamic so that parents are able to find a new way with each other.

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