

Families That Thrive
By John Blackwell, Ph.D.

Judging Others

In our last newsletter, we mentioned that we would like to do some of our newsletters in the style of “Dear Abby.” We immediately received the question below, for which we are most grateful. Please send us your questions. They are most helpful!

Dear John

We have two teens in our house. I notice that they sometimes judge their peers on the basis of some pretty superficial criteria—clothing, whether that person is outgoing or not, physical attractiveness, and so on. Jesus said not to judge others, lest we ourselves be judged. Yet he himself judged other people, even calling Herod a (mild) bad name! So what’s the deal about judging others? Good, bad, or what? I know that, on some level, I judge everyone I meet.

This is a great question. As parents, it’s one that we all face. Where do we begin? I’d like to offer a few suggestions. If we are going to influence our kids, especially when it comes to the important issues of judgment and superficiality, it’s important that we create a climate of acceptance in the home. If our children feel comfortable with us, and confident in our love and acceptance of them, we will have influence with them and can help them to begin to see a bigger picture, which includes understanding the kinds of things that matter most in life.

I think it important not to sabotage our influence with our children by hammering them, judging their judgments harshly, or expressing shock and horror over what they tell us. If we blast away at their less than mature view of the world, they will feel our rejection and withdraw from us.

How do we draw close to our children in these kinds of situations? We can begin with authentic understanding. Teenagers fear rejection. For many, it’s what they fear most. Being a teenager is just plain scary. That’s not going to change. What if we were to open channels of communication with our teens by sharing with them our experience with rejection? As a child and as a teenager, I not only *lived* in fear of rejection, I *was* rejected from time to time. I have also been rejected as an adult. Most of us are. It hurts. For the most part, there are no two ways about it! It’s probably not appropriate to share every single detail with our teens, but if we share something substantive about our own fears and vulnerability, our kids know that we are human. They will likely respond by opening up. They will be interested in our experiences and in what we have to say.

We can also let our kids know that we understand the importance of dressing appropriately. I teach in a university. During the school year, I wear a coat and tie to school every day. Dressing appropriately doesn’t guarantee my success, but it is a factor. We have lots of athletes in our university. Many of the men wear incredibly baggy shorts, some of which go all the way to their ankles. I could dress that way. It would certainly

get everybody's attention, but I'm not sure that's the kind of attention I want to draw to myself! Yes, our children place inordinate emphasis on fashion, but we parents like to dress the part, too.

Having said that, teens can be harsh in the ways they judge their peers, especially when it comes to the way people dress. Teens can act as though fashion is everything. This can become downright cruel when poverty becomes a variable. What if instead of merely criticizing our kids for their harsh judgments, we were to ask, "What do you suppose it's like to be that person? What are that person's dreams, hopes, and fears? How is that person treated?" We can even ask, "How do you think God would judge that person? Would God's judgment be similar to our judgments? And what might God have to say about the way I judge that person and talk about that person?"

We can even put a word from the Sermon on the Mount on the table. Jesus said, "Judge not, lest you be not judged. Why do you try to focus on the speck in your brother's eye when you have a log in your own eye? Remove the log from your eye so that you can see your sister clearly!" What if we were to reflect on that saying together? What if Mom and Dad were to share some of their own struggles with judgment—both as givers and receivers? And what if we were to help them reflect on what Christ would have to say about all of us? What would Christ have to say about my own judgmentalism and my superficiality? How would he deal with me? And were I with this person whom I judge harshly and Christ were right there with us, how would I act? What would I say? How would I treat this person and respond?

One of the things that were most important to my grandmother was what she called The Golden Rule: *Do unto others as you would have them to unto you*. What if we were also to place The Golden Rule on the table and reflect on it together? What if we were to challenge our kids to ask what Christ hopes or expects of us? And what if we were to make a family pact (covenant is the better term!) to work at loving and accepting others together—beginning right in our own homes!

This might even create a climate in which we can level with our kids and tell them what we think. On the one hand, we can appreciate that it's human to be concerned about the way we look. On the other, there's a big difference between the way we look and dress on the one hand and the contents of our character on the other. Character is more a matter of the heart. That's what really counts. We can even challenge our kids to love those who don't dress the part.