

Family Identity

"The shared acceptance of who we are as a team"

Quote: Gary Ezzo.

WHAT IT IS

Families that have a healthy Identity are those where trust is a given. It is the unseen force that binds a family together and makes it unique. It will cause our children to speak of "we, us" or "our" when "you, my" or "mine" would have sufficed.

Our children speak of "our" baby in heaven, and "our" baby in Mum's tummy! Once when our daughter at age 7 noticed something new in the house she asked "When did WE buy that ?" I believe we need to resist the urge to correct that and take it as encouragement that they are secure in their place in the family.

WHY IT MATTERS

The cornerstone of Family Identity is trust. For children to place trust in us we must be *trustworthy*, and live authentic lives before them. So relax a bit - authentic is attainable. Perfect is not.

Growing Kids says the following on trust. As this is taken from "The Fathers Mandate", we have altered the

wording to include Mums also. *"Trust is the foundation on which any good relationship is built*

What is trust? For a child it is the bridge linking his need to know he belongs with actually belonging, his need to know he is accepted with actually being accepted and his need to know he is loved with actually being loved. The bridge of trust built and maintained by parents, secures the child's need to feel connected to his family. Without trust in a relationship you only have a mutual consent to live together... If a child cannot trust his parents more than his peers, inevitably his peers influence him much more than Dad and Mum.

WHAT IT WILL DO

GKGW quote: "Peer pressure is only as strong as family identity is weak"

Building healthy family identity represents work but also gives a positive way to build when cracks and fractures appear in family life.

Family Identity will help our children to choose family values out of desire rather than fear. They will know that whether together or apart, family standards apply and it

will help parental influence to hold in the face of peer pressure.

Over the years I have watched many successful families to see what made them 'work'.

There are some common threads: a sense of humour, fun, demonstrated love (siblings included), trust, loyalty, time, togetherness and teamwork, shared experiences and difficulties - and faith that they share, going beyond the passing of knowledge to a real and living passion for God.

WHAT IT WILL NOT DO

- Bring perfection.
- Create zero conflict.

HOW WE ACHIEVE IT

The things that contribute to a healthy Family Identity are many and varied. Helpful activities are those that promote love, trust, appreciation, loyalty, and acceptance whether together or apart.

For example: an act of service performed by one family member for another while not in their presence builds a bridge of appreciation and love even though the two concerned were not even together.

They also are activities that include two or more of you at a time. We know one family of six who all enjoy bush walking together. All except one that is! Don't be too upset if you find a similar occurrence in your family. Going for a walk is still a great Identity building experience for the rest of the family. Simply look for another activity with a different cross-section of the family that includes the one that didn't go for the walk.

Here are some suggestions for Family Identity Building. Working towards the goal of family identity brings vision to the ordinary.

- Attend one another's sporting events, performances etc.
- Eat meals together whenever possible.
- Have planned family events such as devotions, picnics, outings, 'Family and 'Family Night'.
- Read together.
- Conversation. Tell them stories from when you were a child. Tell them about your parents and siblings. Ask specific questions about their day. Listen to what they say. (Remembering their public, personal and private worlds)
- Recognized traditions (Christmas, Easter, birthdays etc.) as well as invented family traditions. Have an 'un-birthday' or teach them about communion in your own home as a family.
- Teach empathy for one another. Help them know that you understand how they feel when things happen to

them. Tell them about your own painful childhood experiences. Explain to them terms that they can relate to how you feel about things. For example if a child jumps on your bed right after you have just made it, not only do you have a discipline issue, but also an empathy issue. Talk to them about how they would feel if after tidying up their room a younger brother or sister came in and messed it all up. Or if they turn their nose up at dinner, talk to them about how it would feel to them to present you with a painting done at school and you say "Yuck I don't want that!" Constantly be on the lookout for opportunities to explain some one else's feelings.

- Teach joyfulness for one another's achievements and occasions. Teach that life is not fair, that their turn in this or something else - will come.
- Help all family members, as age appropriate, practice speaking the love languages. They don't have to be conversant on the subject; you just make suggestions to them according to the givers or the receivers primary language. For example, our very methodical 9 year old will occasionally tidy up someone else's shoes or make their bed to surprise them.(Acts of Service) Our people oriented 8 year old will often un-prompted spend his pocket money on others.(Gift Giving) Our sensitive 5 year old remembers everyone's ailments and asks after their health hoping they get better soon.(Words of Encouragement)

- Teach the giver of love gifts to give without expectation, and the receiver to receive graciously even if it wasn't something they really wanted. Remember this is all a process and they won't be perfect at it !
- Work together. Right from very little, begin to teach the following:
 - a) That Daddy and Mummy need their help. This gives them a sense of significance to know they are being depended upon.
 - b) Teach a team concept. Explain that Dad doesn't just earn money to spend on himself, it pays for our home, schooling, food, outings etc. Mum doesn't only wash her own clothes or cook only her own food. We all need each other and need to help each other. eg Team time.
 - c) Give them chores they can easily see benefit the rest of the family, not only having to pick up after themselves. Setting the table, keeping the bathroom tidy, collecting kindling for the fire are a few examples for younger ones.
 - d) If preparing for an event at home, (like Christmas dinner) talk to the family unit and explain that this event will be fun for all so we all need to help out before and after.
 - e) Teach them that when it's time for jobs, they are to come back to you after each chore and ask you what is next. Teach them that job time is not over until you tell them they are finished !

- Encourage all family members in their relationships with each other. Work within their natural personality strengths to help this along. Our quiet, reflective 9 year old daughter will read to one of the younger ones for as long as they will sit still. Our larger than life 8 year old son will push a little one around on a bike, pull funny faces (or do anything else active) until told to do otherwise.
- Release your children to appropriate freedoms. Kids who rebel often do so to try and become independent of childhood structures. We will only breed resentment if we try and keep them too dependent on us for too long.
- Have lots of fun. This one really stands out in my mind because no matter how diligent you are in all these other areas, if your home is no fun to be in, they will not want to be there. You don't have to spend any money to make them laugh, and you don't have to plan for a month to create a happy memory.
- Look for ways to surprise them with silliness! When dressing a toddler after the bath, thread their arm into the legs of their P.J's! If taking ages to undress for the bath, plonk them in fully clothed. Turn the music up loud and dance.(You included) Eat dinner under the table. Eat by candlelight often. Have a spaghetti slurping competition, or a seed spitting competition. Have lots of picnics in your own back yard. Have lots of rough and tumble with their Dad. Take lots of walks and "find" treasures on the way. Have

church at home and let the children preach and lead.

Let your imagination go ! Develop little games *only understood by your family*. We have the Pongy feet game, and the Human Xylophone. We have certain trigger words with an adjoining action. Shout "electric shock therapy" in our house and all will drop to the floor with arms and legs waiving madly in the air. Tell them to "walk properly" and they'll all do their best Basil Fawlty impression!

Have masses of tickles and hugs. No matter what their age or love language, they all need physical affection. "Milk shake" them into bed. Let them camp out in the lounge room. Plan some really messy things to do occasionally. Paint (outside is better I've discovered!) on a big roll of newsprint. Let them paint each other and walk in it ! Do some clay work on a big sheet of black plastic and when finished put the plastic on the lawn, squirt it with dish washing liquid, turn on the hose and let them mud skate !

Have a backwards day. Start the day with pizza and finish with cereal and toast. Wear clothes backwards or PJ's all day long ! Always be on the lookout for ideas. We have a story book called "We Eat Dinner in the Bathtub". We haven't actually done that one yet, but we plan to !

WHAT WORKS AGAINST FAMILY IDENTITY

Everything we do has the potential to build or demolish family identity.

We need to focus on words and attitudes and actions that build rather than divide. Words intended to cast shame.

Some examples:

Demolishing words

"As long as you're living under this roof"

Building Words

"This is what our family stands for"

(regardless of whether that has been demonstrated or not!)

We are not to remove personal responsibility from them - and shame can have a rightful place - but it is more helpful to come alongside than to shame and blame.

Before speaking we can learn to consider first:

- Can our relationship take this?
- Will this build or strip our family identity?

DIFFERENT STARTING POINTS

Once again our journeys from family to family will look different due to a number of factors - a major one being our different starting points.

The other major factor is our family uniqueness. Every family is and should be just as unique as the individuals within it. Number of children... age of parents... spacing... areas of talent and interest... education...length of faith journey... differing emphasis of based on application of values... style... etc!

Some things which may be viewed as evidence of rebellion in one family might not be in others. If a boy gets a pierced ear and the dad has a pierced ear this is not rebellion any more than a dad who wears shirt and tie to church having a young son wanting to wear shirt and tie also. A boy with a mad hairstyle might indicate a rejection of family standards in one family but be a simple expression of style in another.

IDENTITY AND PURITY

The "Marks of a Purity Outcome" is a list of markers for a purity outcome. Family Identity fits within the top ranking marker of Parental Influence. Interestingly enough the parental influence hold much sway whether it is positive or negative, but how much better for all of us to choose right through the enablement of relationship rather than fear.

Four of the five markers below are based in relational connectedness. This sense of belonging is so important in all our lives. A place of acceptance and support. We see

this in the negative context of gang violence etc... it is also evident in positive outcomes.

These are the five "Marks of a Purity Outcome"

- 1 Parental influence
- 2 Ongoing teaching and visitation of principles
- 3 Godly mentors
- 4 Positive Peer Pressure
- 5 Relationship with God

WHAT WE CAN BE ENCOURAGED BY

Remember Galatians 6:9.

Let us not become weary in doing good for at the right time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.