

Proactive vs. Reactive Parenting

Parenting often catches us off guard. We cannot fathom some of the situations in which we find ourselves. I never thought I would hear myself say, “You can’t be in the dryer!” And, then having to repeat such statements depending on the child! However, knowing that more is “caught than taught,” we need to be reminded that our reactions are rarely good times for correction. My wife or I will often catch ourselves being so shocked at the situation we react with pulling children away from each other, wading knee deep through a collapsing swimming pool, or cleaning spilled milk and then immediately trying to teach through the situation. This is a mistake because neither my wife nor I, nor the child is in a good place to be giving or receiving constructive feedback! While we do need to “triage” certain situations, we need to be aware of the bigger picture.

Our reactions often come automatically through our fight or flight response located in our limbic system. This is great for survival, but not so great interpersonally. Our higher functioning brain, the part of our brain that uses reason, will-power, and self-control will take a back seat to our limbic response. This helps explain our behavior, but think of our children. Their brains work the same way, and also are not fully developed! When the parent reacts strongly it causes stress to the child and they may not know what they did wrong, how to respond to the fact they are in trouble, or be fixated on how to get out of trouble so intensely they are not hearing a word the parent is saying. In any case, it is not a fruitful time for training and correction.

Part of proactive parenting is teaching expectations, behaviors, and values prior to their being an issue. A great example is practicing manners at home so that our children understand how to interact socially in public or at friend’s homes. However, another part of parenting proactively is understanding ourselves and our tendencies in our emotional reactions. Knowing that we are and should be responsible for ourselves. It is not our children’s behavior that should dictate our emotions and attitude.

The good news about the brain and the limbic system is that it is malleable- it can be changed. We can use our higher functioning brain to train our automatic reactions in a way that is most healthy for our stage of life. A good example of this is the military. Boot camp is 13 weeks of intense stress. Recruits’ brains are trained to react obediently to authority and aggressively to danger. While I am certainly not advocating parenting like boot camp, I am saying that being intentional and practicing self-control, patience, kindness, and gentleness are paramount in proactive parenting.

God tells us that when we submit ourselves to Him, we must focus on training our brain. 2 Corinthians 10: 5 says, “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” Colossians 3:2 instructs us to, “set your minds on things above.” And Romans 12:2 makes it clear that we must be proactive in our minds when Paul states, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” We need to understand our limitations. When are we at our best? At our worst? Are we willing to be patient and calm down before interacting with our children?

Finally, we need to have people around us to help us see ourselves accurately! I believe this is why God gave us the church, like Pastor Micah taught this weekend, if we want to be better, we need the church! If we are not proactive in self-care and soul-care, it becomes much more difficult to be proactive in teaching, correcting, and modeling! I hope this is encouraging to you. God bless.



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