

Parent pages



Resources for Christian Parents in the 21st Century

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When your child has a “story”

An individual child’s perception of events is literally like no other. A child can only understand things from his or her own perspective. When your child comes home with a story of injustice that is accompanied by real emotional pain, it’s hard to know what really happened and how to react in a way that is helpful for your child in the short and long term.

This issue is really about discernment—for the parent and child.

Who endowed the heart with wisdom or gave understanding to the mind? JOB 38:36

Children are egocentric. This is not meant as an insult; it doesn’t mean they are egomaniacs or ultra selfish. Egocentric means the child sees everything from his or her own mindset. The child is unable to understand what someone else might think or feel. In fact, young children believe that everyone is thinking the same thing they are.

If 3-year-old Susie wants a marker and her classmate Billy takes it, she assumes that Billy took it to be mean, because from her frame of reference everyone wants her to have the marker. It does not occur to Susie that Billy wanted the marker for himself and thinks that she is being mean. We cannot talk children out of being egocentric, but we can work at

helping them to develop empathy.

A boy who comes home with a story about the unfairness of a teacher’s decision, or the injustice of treatment from a classmate, is only seeing this event from his perspective. He does not understand that others involved in the situation have their own feelings. This leads him to believe that people are out to get him; just like the 3-year-old who wants the marker.

If we as parents accept the story as being both true and complete, we will only reinforce this incorrect thinking. Yet, if we dismiss his concerns, we are giving him the impression that we don’t believe what he says. The answer is to dig deeper for the whole story.

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

ECCL. 12: 13

Because children are egocentric, it’s easy for them to bend information and give an incomplete picture of what happened. Some children do this intentionally, but most do it unintentionally. They simply remember things that are important to them, forget things that do not relate to their feelings about the story, and sometimes recreate a newer version that fits their strong feelings and perceptions.

Consider these common phrases used by children. In parentheses find the adult



perception:

- △ No one likes me; everybody hates me. (*I couldn’t find someone to play the way I wanted to play.*)
- △ The teacher yelled at me. (*She said something I didn’t want to hear.*)
- △ It’s not fair. (*It’s not the way I want it to be.*)
- △ She deserved it because she bugs me. (*She is different from me and that makes me nervous.*)
- △ The teacher didn’t explain it right. (*I didn’t ask questions.*)
- △ You said I could go. (*I wanted you to say I could go.*)
- △ But, he hit me first. (*I understand my pain, but not my responsibility.*)

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△ You always take her side. (*I am not getting my way at this moment.*)

△ She never lets me do anything. (*I didn't get to do what I wanted at that moment.*)

△ I couldn't help it. (*I didn't stop and think about the consequences.*)

You can see these phrases represent only one side of the story. The information regarding what happened is incomplete and the perspective bends the information to the view of the child.

Most children don't do this on purpose, so the feelings that accompany these phrases are real. As a parent, however, you need to help them understand the whole story.

All man's ways seem right to him but the LORD weighs the heart.

PROV. 21:2

It is important to listen and teach when your child comes home from school with a story. Here are some guidelines to follow when digging for more truth that what your child is offering:

■ **Listen.** Listen to your child's story without prejudice. Do not agree or disagree; just let him tell what he knows and listen for what he is feeling.

■ **Ask.** Ask questions about what happened. Keep asking questions until you are past the shoulder-shrugging stage and begin to feel you are getting a more complete picture.

■ **Write.** Write down the story in your words to clarify with your child. This helps to weed out emotions and discern what is important.

■ **Avoid.** Help your child to avoid statements that indicate they know what someone else intended. Help your child to avoid absolutes such as "everyone" "always" "never." You may need to rephrase the statement for her. ("Today, I had to play alone.")

■ **Dig.** Ask some questions that will help your child empathize with others involved; use "I wonder" questions that encourage your child to imagine another

side to the story. (I wonder what Billy wanted you to do? I wonder what your teacher wants you to learn from this assignment?)

These kinds of questions can lead your child to acknowledge personal accountability. This is the first step to moving outside of ego-centricity and is a sign of maturity.

■ **Problem solve.** Brainstorm with your child some possible ways to handle the situation. Reinforce with him that you are making a list first and then deciding what works later. This will help to keep emotions out of things.

You may need to propose some solutions by helping your child predict what would happen. (I wonder what would happen if you apologized to Susie? I wonder how your teacher could help you with this?) In this way, you are helping your child to see the options she has for dealing with problem situations.

It is better for a child to see what he can do than to have a parent solve everything for him. This only creates feelings of helplessness in children.

■ **Solicit help.** Sometimes you begin to see a pattern in stories your child brings home. Perhaps you suspect that your child is being bullied or that there is a miscommunication between your child and the teacher. This is an excellent time to ask for help from the teacher.

Be sure to list specific examples of what happened, be open to the teacher's input, and be ready to make positive suggestions. A teacher can help if you feel your child cannot get past misperception. Set up a conference that includes your child and let the teacher help you help your child to see a more balanced perspective.

Help your child to see that you and your teacher love her and that is why you want her to understand what is really happening.



■ **Reassure.** Often the process of listening and asking questions is all your child needs to readjust to the situation. Just like adults, children need help in sorting out emotion, desires, and reality. Take this time to hug your child and reassure him that you love him, that his teacher and friends love him, and that especially his Savior loves him.

■ **Pray.** Say a prayer asking God for discernment and thanking Him for attending to even the smallest details of our lives.

Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Ps. 90:12

No one said parenting was going to be easy. However, we know that parenting is a part of God's plan for preparing His children for the work He has planned. You are tools of God, and He will bless your efforts.

For Discussion:

- ▶ Can you think of something that happened during your childhood which takes on a different understanding now that you see it from a parent's perspective?
- ▶ How often does your child say: "You don't understand?" How often is he or she correct?
- ▶ Think of a story your child brought from home. Can you think of a possible different perspective on the story?
- ▶ How can you help your child think about other perspectives?

For Further Study:

- ▶ The book of Proverbs has much to say about friends and discernment; see especially Prov. 2:1-6.