

Faith or Fate: Raising Confident, Responsible Children



This is the beauty of law and gospel: the Father created us and orders our days, the Son died and rose again to forgive and save us, and the Spirit works in our hearts and lives.

“I couldn’t help it! The test was too hard and the teacher doesn’t like me.”

“I thought I was ready, but now I know I should have studied more.”

Which excuse would you rather hear when inquiring about a poor test grade? I don’t think any parent has to study long to give the right answer. We prefer to hear our child accept responsibility and indicate how to correct the behavior. The second response shows a child who can improve her grades. The first indicates a child who doesn’t think improvement is possible unless fate intervenes.

“Nobody likes me. The kids are all mean to me. They don’t let me play.”

“My friend and I got into a fight over who got the ball. We were mad at each other all day, and I missed playing with him.”

The first child demonstrates an external locus of control and the second, an internal locus. This is a theory of Julian B. Rotter, dating back 50 years, which, simply put, means some people attribute what happens to fate or forces outside of their control (external),

and others believe they have some measure of control and responsibility for what happens (internal). Very few people are completely external or completely internal. Most of us lean toward one or the other. Young children show more external locus, but as they grow and mature, they become internal. A child’s family can and does have an influential effect on whether he is likely to believe he can take responsibility and make a change.

“It’s not worth studying; I am just bad at math.”

“Long division is the hardest thing I have ever tried to learn. Maybe Mom can help me after supper.”

The advantage to internal locus of control is the belief that any effort I extend has the potential to make a difference. Such children are motivated to work hard, ask questions, and try again after less than optimum success.

The disadvantage of an external locus of control is the feeling of helplessness when life brings on troubles. Such children will not see the possibility or the value of effort and may even struggle simply coping with what

has happened, believing themselves to be nothing more than a victim.

The good news found in locus of control is that parents have much opportunity to influence their children toward an internal locus. The best way we do this is to model this behavior for them. Think about how you have reacted to bad news, disappointment, or troubles. You don't want to hide your reactions from your children, but you do want them to see you cope in healthy ways. Consider the following situations.

.....

“I can't believe your teacher assigned you this much homework. How does she expect you to get this done?”

“This is a long assignment. Let's see how much you can finish before bedtime. You will have to talk to your teacher tomorrow about the rest.”

Don't solve problems for your children. Giving your child good advice and taking over are two different things. When you solve a problem for your child, you are telling her that she is not capable of making good decisions. Even if the decision is beyond the capabilities of your child, it is wise to ask her opinion, and, whenever possible, let her find and use the solution.

.....

“Tom, I like the introduction you wrote for your paper; it really makes me want to read the rest. Your conclusion, though, leaves me with a few questions.”

Do give feedback instead of too much praise. When you give feedback, which is essentially telling your child what is good as well as what needs improvement, you are giving your child important information for taking control of the situation. You are



telling him that you recognize his work and have confidence he will improve. If you only criticize, you will create dependency; if you only praise, you will cause stress, as your child will feel the need to be perfect in order to always earn your praise.

Rotter's theory of locus of control has been the subject of much research over the years. One thing has remained a mystery, however. Rotter never did figure out the curious fact about people of faith and their locus of control.

As Christians, we admit to external locus; We know that God is in control of our lives, and we are unable to save ourselves. We know that God is in control of the solutions to our problems, yet we act as if we have internal locus; we do not sit around waiting for things to happen to us; we walk the path God sets before us. This is the beauty of law and gospel: the Father created us and orders our days, the Son died and rose again to forgive and save us, and the Spirit works in our hearts and lives.

.....

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9).

For Discussion:

- ▶ Are you more internal or external locus of control?
- ▶ Does this match with the way you handled things as a child?
- ▶ Have you seen evidence that your child is becoming more internal as he or she grows and matures?
- ▶ How can you explain to your child that accepting responsibility is good in the long run?

For Further Study:

A quick definition of locus of control:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Locus_of_control

From Lutheran Hour Ministries a JCParentZone article on teaching children responsibility:

www.jcparentzone.com/Articles/article.asp?id=11740