

Shame-Based Families, Grace-Based Families

The messages of a shame-based family:

“Don’t talk, don’t trust, don’t feel.”

“Everybody has to put their needs aside so we can tiptoe around _____ and not make them mad.”

“Why did you do that, you dumb b*tt?”

“If you disappoint me this much, how much more are you disappointing God?”

“Oh please, you’re not wearing that, are you?”

“Loser . . . stupid . . . such an embarrassment . . . I hope nobody knows you’re my daughter . . . You’ll never amount to anything . . . I wish I’d never had you . . . You’re so fat. And ugly.”

Every message of a shame-based family is an arrow into someone’s heart. Left there unacknowledged and not pulled out with truth, it starts generating lies and pain that can last a lifetime.

Lots of people grew up in this kind of family, but we are not sentenced to repeating it into the next generation. We can put on the brakes and steer our families in another direction altogether-the direction of grace.



Grace-based families also have messages:

“You are loved and valued, no matter what you do.”

“When we disagree, you never have to worry that I will stop loving you.”

“I was wrong and I am sorry. Will you forgive me?”

“Did you do your best? You’re the only one who can know.”

“Let’s talk about why you did that. What other choices did you have? What can you learn from this?”

“Can you help me understand what happened, what you were thinking or saying when you ____?”

The underlying message of a shame-based family is, “You are not acceptable and you risk being rejected and abandoned.” The underlying message of a grace-based family is, “You are an important and cherished part of this family and you will always be loved and accepted, even if we need to discipline you for wrong choices.”

Shame-based families shame out loud through name-calling, deadly comparisons (“Why can’t you be like ____?”), and anything that indicates the person is not good enough. Grace-based families affirm out loud with uplifting expressions of belief in each other, appreciation for each other, and affectionate use of each other’s names. Each person feels that their name is safe in everyone else’s mouths—but most especially mom and dad’s.

The focus of shame-based families is on performance, looking good and being good on the outside. It’s all external. Not embarrassing the family is huge. The focus of grace-based families is on the heart, remembering that character is shaped and developed in the family. The child’s value—which never changes—is separated from his or her behavior, which is eminently changeable. These families remember that God is not really pleased with our choices sometimes, but He never stops loving us.

Shame-based families specialize in unspoken rules and expectations. They are discovered when one gets broken. Often, one of the unspoken rules is that no one is supposed to notice or mention problems; if you bring a problem into the light by asking, “Hey, what about this?”—YOU become the problem. When one of my friends told her parents that her brother had been molesting her, her father threatened, “Don’t you ever talk

about this again. It is over.” When the abuse continued and she told her youth pastor, her father responded that his daughter was mentally ill, a pathological liar, and not to believe her.

There is often a “can’t-win” rule in effect: children are taught never to lie, but they are also not allowed to tell Grandma her cooking tastes awful. Or children are taught that smoking is bad, but if they point out that mom or dad smoke, they are shamed and shut down.

In grace-based families, rules and expectations are clearly spelled out. If an unspoken rule comes to light because someone broke it, it gets talked about without shaming the one who broke a rule they didn’t know was in place. If someone notices or mentions a problem, the problem is addressed instead of attacking the one who brought it up. In grace-based families, the *problem* is the problem, rather than the person who identified it.

Shame-based families often use coded messages to communicate, saying one thing while intending that their audience read their minds and respond to the actual message they wanted to give without coming right out and speaking it. Someone might say, “I have such a headache” and the second person replies, “That’s too bad” or “Sorry” and then continues to do whatever they were doing. The first gets upset that the other person didn’t offer to get them a pain reliever. The one with the headache used to be me, until a wise mentor responded with, “Would you like an Advil? Healthy people ask for what they need and want. Just ask me if I have one.” Whoa. That was a game-changer for me!

The communication in grace-based families tends to be clear and straight. It’s about saying what is true and what is actually meant. Scripture calls that “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). And healthy communication does not involve an unnecessary third person, a term called

“triangulating.” If someone complains about another person, or gives a message for another family member, a wise person redirects them to the one they actually need to communicate with, refusing to be the third person in a two-person communication. Another wise person has said, “If you don’t have a dog in that fight, stay out of it.” That works!

Shame-based families are preoccupied with fault or blame. They are always looking for where to place—or shift—the blame when something goes wrong. Then the culprit can be shamed, humiliated, and made to feel so bad they don’t do it again.

In grace-based families, the emphasis is on responsibility and accountability. People are responsible for their choices and held accountable for their behavior. Grace-based parents try to remember that all of life is training for a child, and it takes many, many times to learn wise and healthy behavior. So while a child may be disciplined, they are not punished for not getting something right. Instead of being shamed for slamming the door, they may be instructed, “OK, I guess you need practice in closing the door without slamming it. So you’ll be practicing 25 times in a row, starting right now.” Another way that grace-based families can build responsibility and accountability is by using natural consequences without anger: “Since you left your bicycle in the driveway again, you will lose the privilege of enjoying it for a week.” And sometimes, discipline without punishment means talking about what happened without shaming, by asking good questions: “So what can you learn from this?” “What can you do differently next time?”

Family is meant to be God’s safety net underneath is, the safe place to fall when we make mistakes and learn painful life lessons. By His grace and through being intentional, shame-based families can become grace-based families as we reflect on how God, the perfect Parent, loves us perfectly and unconditionally-yet teaches us to be responsible as we grow up to maturity.

Note: the grace-based family in the picture are my friends Rick and Abbie Smith with their sons Noah and Jaxten. If you want a blessing, check out their story of grace at noahsdad.com/story.

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“It’s Not Your Fault!”

There’s a great scene in the fantasy movie “Disney’s The Kid” where a middle-aged man, played by Bruce Willis, meets up with his little boy self. The two of them go to their childhood home where the boy learns the horrific news that his mother will die soon, and his father blames him. The grown-up version of the boy knows that he carried the terrible burden of guilt and shame about his mother’s death for years. He kneels down, looks his little-boy self full in the face, and assures him, “It’s not your fault,” lifting the burden from the little boy before he ever has to carry it. These four words, “It’s not your fault,” are truly one of the most powerful gifts an adult can give a child. This is a powerful truth that children need to hear and they can’t tell themselves; only an adult can give them this “special revelation.”

Children are naturally self-centered and they think everything that happens to them is connected to them and their choices or their character. Of course that’s not true. Stuff just happens, but a child can’t know that. A little girl’s parents divorce and her world falls apart. She thinks, if I had obeyed more, if I were prettier or more talented, my daddy would still be here. She needs for both parents to say, “This is about us. It’s not your fault.”

A beloved grandparent dies. Or a pet dies, and a child blames himself. He needs to be told that it's not his fault, and no matter what he thought—like not wanting to visit with his grandpa one afternoon—or what he did—like forgetting to feed the cat—he doesn't have the power to make those kinds of things happen, and it's not his fault.

My friend's son has Tourette's syndrome, and we were talking one day about how to help him handle it. I suggested she make sure he knew he wasn't responsible for it, and she assured me, "Oh, he already knows that." But that night, as she was tucking him into bed, she said, "You know this isn't your fault, don't you?" His eyes got big and it was like a huge weight rolled off his shoulders. With great relief in his voice, he asked, "*It ISN'T???*" My friend had thought he already understood, but we can't ever assume kids own that truth until we give it to them.

And if children don't know that bad things are not their fault, they can take on guilt that weighs heavily on them for years. Others react by wrapping themselves in shame. For example, when a girl is sexually abused, she feels dirty and broken, like damaged goods. She needs to be told, "It's not your fault." Even when those broken little girls are grown-ups, the little girl inside still needs for someone to tell her, "It's not your fault."

Has a bad thing—or something a child perceives as bad—happened to a child you know? Give them the gift they can't give themselves, the truth that will set them free. Tell them it's not their fault.

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