

The Enduring Effects of a Parent's Daily Chatter

Steve Burchett

About a week ago, a knock came to my bedroom door. "Who is it?"

"It's Lilly!"

Playfully, I responded, "Lilly? Who's Lilly?"

"The pretty one, Dad!"

"Of course, come on in!"



That's a cute story, but why did she call herself "the pretty one?" Let me explain.

I recall a shrieking little girl and then an exasperated mother handing me a brush. At that moment, I became the official "brush your daughter's hair after her shower" person. Apparently, girls get gnarly knots in their hair that not even the best conditioner on the market can untangle (especially when it's not used properly).

I took this new responsibility as an opportunity to demonstrate love for my daughter. Not only was I patient with each stroke, but as I brushed her hair I would softly say, "So pretty... So pretty." At first, my daughter would simply agree, "Uh huh, Daddy." I had to explain to her that a "thank you" was the appropriate response to a compliment like that.

My youngest is now eight, and because of a syndrome she was born with, she still needs a little help getting those knots out. I'm so happy to oblige, and I still tell her how pretty she is. "Thank you, Daddy."

So, when Lilly identified herself as "the pretty one" the other day, I realized that my tender words over the past few years during our "hair brushing" appointments have made an enduring impression. And that reminded me of this: A parent's words will have a lasting effect upon a child. This is even (especially?) true of a parent's typical, daily chatter.

When Paul exhorted fathers to "bring up...children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4), he certainly meant that they should strategize formal ways of training their children. But non-scripted communication with children teaches them, also. With that in mind, here are three questions to help parents begin evaluating the way they talk to and around their kids in more relaxed settings.

Do they hear words of affirmation and love?

Every parent knows that children crave affirmation. They can't wait to demonstrate how they can stand on one foot, or to show you what they made that they just know you will think is astounding. We should respond with an attentiveness that reveals our joy in what they have done and who they are becoming. They are gifts from God, made in his image, so they deserve our respect. Very little will mean more to our children than words of praise and approval. With a steady diet of positive words, they'll probably go on in life achieving more than they thought possible.

Sadly, we are often too distracted to listen and respond. "I'll look at it later when I have time" is sometimes a legitimate excuse. But it might really be a line to justify focusing on self. If you take that approach regularly, don't be surprised if your children don't want to talk much when they are older.

Do they hear too much about current events, and too little about the Lord?

"Current events" includes subjects like politics and sports. The 24-hour news cycle fills our minds with statistics, debates, highlights, opinions, and conspiracies. It's so interesting, we can barely keep from talking about it.

I sometimes ponder what my children will say about me at my funeral. It's fine if they recall how I enjoyed talking college hoops, or evaluating Supreme Court decisions. Yet, I especially hope they make statements like, "He loved to talk about what he was learning in Scripture, and to learn what others were understanding from their Bible reading," or, "He loved the church so much, he was always asking people how their church was doing."

Do they hear an acknowledgement of sins and rejoicing in the Savior?

Oh how I want my children to know and follow Jesus! So, I must tell them the gospel. But I can also communicate God's grace if I'm open about my own sins and my need for God's forgiveness. Some parents might think that they must always appear strong to their children. Wrong. They don't need perfect parents, they need humble parents who admit their weaknesses and who rejoice in God's mercy through Christ.

This doesn't mean that parents should confess all their sins to their children, or that they should walk around every day depressed about their failings. But our children need to know that we stand with them in need of a Savior, and that God forgives all who are united to Christ by faith. Honesty about sins, and exalting in Jesus, preaches the gospel powerfully.

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