

Family Relationships: It's Not About Winning and Losing

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Recently, our eight year old daughter had an interesting school assignment. She had to write a paragraph about family relationships. As she sat and thought, I sat and thought too. However, my ideas were more about what family relationships are not.

Family relationships are not about who is right and who is wrong. Often times, I work with couples who are both entrenched in the idea of being right. In trying to make their point, harsh words are exchanged. These words are intentionally chosen to cut to the core of the other person's sense of self worth and dignity. It is at these times that the partners are more concerned about being right than about the other person. Sometimes there truly is neither a right nor wrong. It is more beneficial to think in terms of what the other person's needs are instead of trying to determine who is right and who is wrong.

Relatedly, family relationships are not about winning and losing. Sometimes there are power struggles in families. These power struggles can be between any two or more people in the family. In power struggles, family members try to get even with one another by inflicting pain. The unconscious thinking is that whomever inflicts the most pain is the winner. The truth is that no one wins here and each family member loses. It is more beneficial to think in terms of working through the conflicts. Conflicts will happen and family members will fail and disappoint each other at times.

Similarly, family relationships are not about bad and good. I have worked with many families in which one family member was assigned to be the "bad one." The "bad" family member is given the assignment of carrying the parents' and family's negative emotions, failures and disappointments. This family member does a lot of work in the family and is essentially instructed to "act out." Conversely, one family member is assigned to be the "good one." The "good" family member is given the assignment of carrying the parents' and family's positive emotions and successes. This family member also does a lot of work in the family; however, their assignment is to be perfect and to achieve. Both of these situations are dangerous because the person's sense of belonging and self worth comes from how well they carry out their assignments. It is more beneficial to think in terms of each family member having strengths and weaknesses and for family members to work together and help each other.

After I had written my thoughts, I glanced over to see what my daughter had written. She wrote that family relationships were about getting acquainted with one another. She has a point there. We are all growing and changing. We need to give others the

freedom to grow and change. Secondly, she wrote that family relationships were about having confidence that family members wanted the best and wanted to do the best for each other. Lastly, she wrote that family relationships were about loving each other. Now there is a thought.

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