

Neutral Feedback In The Family

A Guide To Building Trust In Parenting

When communicating with children, spouses, or friends, we rarely come from a position void of judging, manipulating, or persuading. However, learning to be neutral delivers the safest and most productive platform for communication.

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Table Of Contents

Christmas 2009	3
Wii Boxing	3
My Birthday	3
The Shot Heard Round The World	4
Breach Of Cake Etiquette	5
Physician Heal Thyself	5
Suggested Dialogue:	5
Family Feedback In The Real World	6
Neutrality	6
Trust In Parenting	7

Christmas 2009

Wii Boxing

For Christmas, 2009, my children received a Wii game unit. Before the day had expired Samuel, my 8-year-old son challenged me to a boxing match.

Finally, I thought, something electronic where I can whup on my kids. I've got formal training in the martial arts and can move my hands quicker than any 8-year-old boy. The results? I didn't make it past round 1. Sam KO'd me.

How on earth do children learn electronic games so quickly? Why can't they learn their school lessons or how to clean their rooms as quickly? The answer? Feedback. The feedback on a video game is neutral, no emotion and it's immediate. *'You missed.'* *'Hit!'* *'Better luck next time.'*

The young skulls full of mush assimilate the information and they immediately try again. How does it work in marriage and raising children?

My Birthday

A major stumbling block in parenting and marriage is that we rarely receive or deliver neutral feedback. For example, last year for my birthday, Cheri, my wife, surprised me with a German chocolate cake.

I'm not much into sweets, but leading up to my oft-celebrated day, she verified that German chocolate cake was my favorite flavor. In fairness to the situation, I remember in high school how much I loved it, so I answered truthfully, but I haven't had many cakes since high school, so my memory was tainted with what once was.



On my birthday, we had only immediate family over. We had a wonderful evening with cake and ice cream, presents, and funny stories. As the evening wound down and all the family members were gathered in the eating area, Cheri asked me if I liked the cake. I had only eaten two bites, although my ice cream was utterly consumed.

I grunted, taking a page out of the teenager's book of non-communicating skills. Cheri, however, is far too skilled a parent to let her oldest child get away with that. She rephrased the question inserting my name:

"Rich, how did you like the cake."

Notice the subtle difference in the phraseology. *'Did you like the cake'* gives me permission



to practice teenagers talking techniques. This question only requires a yes or a no answer, unless you are skilled in teen talk. Which I am.

Therefore, I grunted a non-committed *yes* combined with a definite avoidance of a *no*, masked in a single syllabic utterance.

'How did you like the cake' however, meant she expected a response with a greater syllabic count than one. Using the familiar, shortened version of my first name meant she was serious.

For the sake of fair reporting, I don't remember my exact response, however, if you asked my family it was horrific.

I believe I said it was fine but that it was too sweet. Something like that and from a neutral tone, or so I thought.

The Shot Heard Round The World

Nobody said anything. I didn't notice any smirks, grimaces, or facial features of disapproval from wife, sons, or daughter-in-law.

The evening ended. I thanked my wife for the lovely event and we retired. More than one full week transpired before the subject of my birthday cake resurfaced. All family members who attended my birthday gathering were once again in the eating area of our home.

During the exchange of words and sentences that filled the air, I made a comment on effective communicating within the family unit and you would have thought that I assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria again.

A veritable shot heard round the world.

My daughter-in-law, Heather was first on the scene, letting me know how bold, brash, abrasive, and shocking my cake comment was.





Charles, my eldest son, and spouse to Heather, quickly signed a treaty with Heather and threw the weight of his army behind her, ready willing and able to defend his bride and his mother as he opined further about my indiscretion on the cake matter.

The boys all chimed in as I was roasted, no skewered over my cake comment.

Cheri was more gracious and forgiving than the others but felt I needed improvement in all matters of cake etiquette.

Breach Of Cake Etiquette

On the night of the offending breach of said etiquette, I had no idea of the tsunami that awaited me when the lava flow breached the crater.

People are not video games and therefore it's a skill to develop neutrality in giving loved ones feedback. However, if my family were a video game perhaps I would have heard comments like this:



"Missed" "Better luck next time" (listen for the neutral computer voice)

"That's a great way to offend your wife dad, do you want to try that answer again?"

"That's interesting honey, what do you mean by too sweet?"

"So you're saying that your taste buds have atrophied, while your memory has not?"

During the initial assault from my family, as the landing craft was unloading on Coconut Beach, I feebly defended my position. Within a short time frame, I quickly retreated from that strategy and flowed with the assault and took my beating.

Physician Heal Thyself

Suggested Dialogue:

We interrupt this narrative for a word from the author. I have since replayed the scene over and over in my mind. Here is a suggested response I offer to myself in the spirit of 'physician heal thyself.'

Cheri: *"How is the cake."*

Rich: *"It appears my high school memory and my taste buds are in conflict."*

Cheri: *"You've only eaten two bites?"*

Rich: *"The frosting is richer than I remember. Thank you for the cake, it means a lot to me."*

But I didn't say that.

I had no idea that my words and tonality were so caustic. Had my volcanic offspring not erupted, I wouldn't know to this day? I'm grateful for children who are comfortable enough to give me feedback when I error.

Family Feedback In The Real World

Sadly, family feedback is usually immediate and fatal. Here are some examples of how it plays out sometimes when we lose our neutrality and invite contention:

Wife:

"I went to all this work because you told me this was your favorite cake. Thanks a lot!"

Kids:

"Nice job dad, way to ruin it for everyone."

Dad:

"It's not my fault, you made it too sweet? That's not how my mom used to make it."

Neutrality

The importance of neutrality is to avoid creating the very thing you want to avoid. Contention. Contention is the absence of progress and dialogue.

If the intent is to provoke an argument and to prove a point, the above judging and caustic statements work as good as any. The tonality will be accusatory to engender strong emotional outbursts and potential retaliation.

However, if you want peace and tranquility in the home where learning, improvement and harmony exist, neutrality gives you the highest probability of success.

Most people (children, spouses, and teenagers) want to learn and improve. Backing anyone into a corner is counterproductive. It takes time to learn the skill of neutrality, but it can be accomplished.

Kids are successful at computer games because they don't ignore the feedback. They are also not offended. They don't negotiate with "missed." They adjust and move on.

Effective communication is a two-way street. If you are on the receiving end, your responsibility is to focus on *what* is right not on *who* is right.

If you are on the giving end, staying in a neutral, non-judging position creates a safe space for communication. That space of safety will lead to trust and respect within your relationship.

And TRUST is where you want to be.

Trust In Parenting

