



Affirmations for Parenting

The Boston Marathon is among the world's best-known races. One of the most infamous portions of the 26-mile, 385-yard course is "Heartbreak Hill." Thousands of spectators gather to cheer on the near-collapsing runners. During one race a young man was near total exhaustion as he approached the foot of Heartbreak Hill. It was doubtful that he could go a step farther. Halfway up the hill an older man, who was obviously in better shape, came alongside the younger man, put his arm around him, and spoke quietly to him. Together, step by step, they painstakingly made their way to the top. This is a picture of affirmation. The writer in Hebrews calls us to "strengthen the feeble arms and weak knees" (Heb.12:12).

The Bible not only encourages us to affirm but also contains stories of how people were affirmed. For example, the story in Exodus 17:8-13 is a picture of an enormous struggle and the weariness that comes from striving to reach up to God. Certain destruction is averted by the coming alongside of committed family and friends. When the Amalekites attacked Israel, Moses sent Joshua into battle. Moses withdrew to the mountain for the labour of oversight and intercession with God. He discovered that when he held his hands and staff up to the Lord, Israel prevailed in the battle but when he let his hands down in weariness, the Amalekites prevailed. Soon Moses' hands were so heavy that he could no longer raise them in victory. Moses' brother and brother-in-law moved him toward a resting stone and came underneath his weary arms and lifted his hands to the Lord. As a result, Joshua defeated Amalek.

In the New Testament mutual affirmation is one of the normal ways of ministering love to one another in Christian fellowship. Paul himself is a wonderful example of this in the way he endorses those to whom he writes, always endorsing them in the opening lines of his letters, even those who are not affirming, but criticizing him (as, for example, the Corinthians).

1. Affirming In the Family

I like the story of the little girl who was late in arriving home and her anxious mother was angry. The mother began to scold her: "Why are you so late?" The little girl said, "I had to help my friend. She was in trouble." "What did you do to help her?" asked the mother. "Oh, I sat down and helped her cry." (Anonymous, Forbes Magazine, July 17, 1995, p. 344). Affirmations are the kind of encouragement that helps one to go on.

In a survey, parents were asked to record how many criticisms versus affirmative comments they made to their children. The results were alarming: they criticized 10

times for every affirming comment. In one Florida city teachers were surveyed to show that they gave 75% more criticisms than verbal blessings. The Institute of Family Relations reports that it takes four affirming statements from a teacher/parent to offset the effects of one criticisms to a child. William Barclay comments: “One of the highest of human duties is the duty of encouragement. It is easy to pour cold water on their enthusiasm; it is easy to discourage others. The world is full of discouragers. We have a Christian duty to encourage one another. Many a time a word of praise or thanks or appreciation or cheer has kept a man on his feet” (William Barclay, “The Letter to the Hebrews.” The Daily Study Bible, 1955, p.95). However, it is not so easy to affirm another (especially when you want to receive the blessing that you give away).

2. We Should Also Affirm Each Other In the Church

Knowing some of the difficulties our church leaders would be facing in the beginning of a new year, I wrote the following blessing for them. “Enough joy to keep you pure. Enough slings and arrows to keep you courageous and watchful. Enough anguish to keep you vulnerably human. Enough hope to keep you faithful daily. Enough failure to keep you humble. Enough sleep to keep you rising early to pray. Enough wealth to keep you generous to others who few are generous to. Enough confusion to keep you wondering and dreaming. Enough success to keep you eager. Enough friends to keep you encouraged. Enough enthusiasm to keep you expectant. Enough hardihood to keep you willing.”

In this way I sought to affirm in advance the work they would do and the struggle they would have.

3. Practical Helps to Affirm Your Family

- In intimate relationships, we can lose the intimacy by over-familiarity. Often it is good to return to treating each other as strangers! With strangers we are often polite, affirming and interested. Our conversation is more focused on the other than ourselves. For married couples who find their affections broken and in need of affirmation, this idea can help. When our kids come home from school with a disappointing grade, greeting them attentive listening is an affirming gift.
- Affirmation comes from the honest request of God to be able to see what is good in the family. It takes no spiritual gift to see what is going wrong but it does take the Holy Spirit to show us what is good and excellent. To be able to say directly to our children how they are excellent in our eyes, and in God’s eyes, is the kind of affirmation is life-giving to our children.
- To discipline a child, the parent needs to be affirming to achieve a positive change of behavior. When my children would do something wrong, rather than lash out, I would quietly invite them to talk with me. I had two questions that I used to engage their minds. “What were you doing?” was the first. When my son or daughter would accurately express wrongdoing without blaming, I asked the second question – “What are you supposed to be doing?” My kids have always been creative in

designing new change behaviors! Then I would affirm with the strong words – “You can do it!”

- Another point about discipline – it is often done best with positive touch. When my children were pre-teens, I would rub their backs while I was hearing their confession of their personal wrongdoing. And when they had a new change plan, I would lay my hands upon their shoulders as I affirmed their ability to carry out the right and necessary change.
- Practice “positive gossiping.” A family on the Canadian prairies were “good gossipers.” When the children were tucked into bed at night, the mom and dad sipped tea and exchanged positive affirmations of their children around the wood-burning stove. This wonderful convenience distributed warmth and over-heard conversation throughout the farm home. Nightly, the children would fall asleep hearing their parents brag about them with great love! Sometimes it is awesome to hear your name spoken well. We do this over our dinner table; speaking well of one child to another member of the family. Often what is heard “incidentally” is most powerful.
- Observations are always more powerful than compliments. Compliments can feel “for nothing” and are often discarded before they are fully enjoyed. A therapist, after giving an affirmation he wanted his client-friend to remember. Upon hearing the dismissive ‘thank you’, will say, “This is not a compliment. It is an observation.” observations are valued as being true and authentic.
- Catching your kids “doing good.” When my daughter was four years old and quite proud of her long brown hair, she was observed by the church grouch stroking her locks during worship. Expecting a reprimand and wanting to protect a reprimand, I leaned over, and heard, to my surprise: “Christine, you have beautiful hair and you are a beautiful girl. I love how you sing.” Later, my daughter said, “That nice lady caught me doing good!” That is affirmation!
- Quiet listening is one of the greatest affirmations. After complicated leadership meetings in our church, I would sometimes phone my wife to put on the tea and be prepared to listen. What a delight to talk without interruption and without being rephrased. Listening to our children is equally important. I was a teenager when my mother came to my bedroom and listened attentively to my newly purchased record, and then asked to hear it again. That kind of quiet listening serves as a good reminder to me when I feel too busy to listen to my wife or my children.
- Dump the “yes, buts.” A “yes, but” is a hidden criticism behind a half-hearted compliment. Dump them both. Also, evaluating and comparing one person with another is almost always un-affirming. Address people on their own merits.
- Recognize that affirmation is a challenging skill. When someone is well affirmed, it often is psychologically upsetting! People are not used to the straight-forward challenge an affirmation is. Affirmations challenge how a person thinks about himself; it confronts discrepancies in how he views his life.

Affirmation is a friendship-making skill for the Christian family. Parents need to be friends with their kids and create an atmosphere where their kids can be friends with

them. Friendships are built and sustained by affirmation as are good marriages and good families. Author Lawrence Peters (p. 82) has noted that you can always tell a real friend by the fact that when you've made a fool of yourself he doesn't feel you've done a permanent job. In the family, affirmation is the ability to maintain a listening and caring relationship with a child or spouse who has failed.

When we affirm each other, God is there affirming us: "The Lord your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior; He will exult over you with joy, He will quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy" (Zephaniah 3:17). The ultimate affirmation is from God at the end of the race: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Mt.25:35). These are affirming words for parents who are doing the best they can.

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