

Thursday Community Connection

Family Matters – Who? What? Why?

Ruth Johnson, Presenter
Laurie Ahrens

Prayer: Father, we thank you for bringing us together tonight to learn about you. Help us to open our eyes and our ears so that we can learn what you want to teach us about how to treat our parents, how to treat our children, and how to treat each other. Help us to open our hearts so that we feel the love that you have for us as your children. We pray this in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Tonight I am going to introduce our new Family Matters program by answering three questions -- **Who** does the program involve? **What** is the program? and **Why** is it important?

Who is involved in Family Matters? The Family Matters program involves all of us. The primary audience of the program is certainly the men in the FreedomWorks program, but it also involves the families of the FreedomWorks guys, the FreedomWorks staff and the volunteers. The men in the FreedomWorks program will be doing the work to evaluate their relationships with their family members and to reconcile relationships where needed, but it will take support from the mentors, staff, and other FreedomWorks volunteers. Reconciliation and establishing healthy family relationships is a difficult thing because one size doesn't fit all. Each situation is unique. That is why we need everyone to understand the purpose of the Family Matters program so that you can do your part to help make it successful.

Let's go around the table and state your name, number of children and their ages to get an idea of who we are going to be reaching out to over the next few weeks and months going forward. This class will be done in two parts with the next session in two weeks. Should the need arise I am also able to meet one on one with you here at the house.

What is Family Matters? Family Matters includes inviting family members to the Community Bible Studies (CBS) on Monday nights, offering classes at the Tuesday Life skills meetings to help men build healthy relationships, offering teachings on marriage and parenting at the Thursday Community Connections, and helping families connect with resources to address specific family needs.

The FreedomWorks men have been introduced to Family Matters at Thursday evening Community meetings with just a brief reminder to attend the Tuesday night Life Skills meeting and this session will be periodically repeated as new men enter the program. I'd like to briefly share what happens at this meeting. We begin by using a BEFORE and AFTER model. "You know what your life was like BEFORE prison, and you know what Prison or Jail was. What does your life AFTER look like?" The guys are asked to write a couple of sentences of how they see their family in their new life. We discuss the attributes of healthy and unhealthy relationships.

Let's try that right now. Can we list 10 attributes of a healthy relationship? Now, 10 attributes of an unhealthy relationship? Next, they consider their specific family members. Are there people who they need to reconcile with, either to forgive them or to seek forgiveness? Perhaps a parent? A child? Another relative? The men complete a worksheet listing each family member, their goal for the relationship, as well as any challenges such as legal issues (Order of protection), anger, distrust, addiction, healthy boundaries, distance, etc. We discuss communication techniques because some of these conversations are very difficult. I also share information about the impact of incarceration on the family, particularly on the children, and discuss how to build and regain trust. Finally, we discuss how to live a Christ-centered family life through healthy family activities. Mentors, staff, and volunteers can help the men work toward the goals they have established to reconcile with their family members. This will take time.

Why is Family Matters so important?

There are many reasons, but I will start with the most important reason. God tells us to do it. He commands us to honor our parents, to love our children and to teach our children about God. Could someone please look up and read the following verses:

Deuteronomy 5:16

"Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you; that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you, in the land which the Lord your God gives you."

Ephesians 6:1-4

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth". Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

God created mankind, and family is at the very heart of God's plan for humanity. One of the goals of FreedomWorks is to reconcile men coming out of prison back into God's original design for them as Godly men, loving husbands, and caring fathers. Family Matters can help do that. Work on your support system and expand the areas of support you need to be successful. Find a church that supports you and get involved. Don't just be a bench warmer! You are learning to live a sober life. Seek out some new activities that may help you enjoy your new life.

Another reason that Family Matters is so important is that healthy family relationships help support recovery and the positive life changes that the men are making through the FreedomWorks program. Healthy relationships and good parenting are learned skills. We are not born with that knowledge. So where do we learn parenting skills? The obvious answer might be from OUR parents. But many of us had parents who were not the model of good parenting. There is a better place to look. Could someone look up and read the following verses:

Romans 8:14-16

“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

1 John 3:1 (NIV)

“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.” Throughout the Bible, we are called children of God. That means we can look to how God treats us to see examples of good parenting skills. What parenting do we see? (Forgiveness, teaching us, caring for us, providing our needs, sacrifice). As you read your Bible, think about how God treats us as his children.

2 Corinthians 5:18 - 20 (NIV)

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”

A final reason that Family Matters is so important is that your children need fathers in their lives. The impact of incarceration on the family is significant, particularly on the children.

What is the definition of Reconciled:

Reconciled - restore to friendship, reunite, fix up, patch up, correct

End of Hour One.

Brief review of the first session:

What are the Impacts on Children:

The Annie E. Casey Foundation calls incarceration “a shared sentence” because of the devastating toll on the children. The impact on a child depends on the family situation, age and maturity of the child, resiliency of the child, their coping skills, and any trauma experienced. The absence of a parent and his subsequent return is very difficult on minor children. Men returning from prison or from a treatment program often expect that when they return to the home, the family will return to the way it was before prison, but this is never the case. When someone goes to prison, the family is disrupted and has to stabilize. There is another adjustment when they return.

Young children often feel it was their fault that dad went to prison. Children experience guilt, worry, fear, confusion, shame and anger. Their knowledge of prison is based on TV. In nearly every case the family hides the fact that a parent is incarcerated. Sometimes families create complicated stories. Younger children are told, “dad is away at school” or “on a trip”. If a child does know the truth, they may be trained to lie about it in some settings. Trust is usually lost and must be rebuilt. (Story about girl asking dad, “Can you watch TV?”) Anger and retaliation can be involved when a child is used as a weapon by a parent.

Each family situation is unique but we know the statistics of what happens to children who have an incarcerated parent. The 2013 Minnesota Student Survey indicated that 1 in 6 kids had a parent incarcerated now or in the past, and the impacts on these kids is alarming:

- Worse school attendance (no one at home cares about them!)
- More discipline issues (children need rules and schedules)
- Lower grades (nobody checks with them daily about school)
- Less school connectedness (these children are loners and don't do sports!)
- Higher and earlier rates of alcohol, tobacco, and drug use
- Earlier sexual activity
- More mental health problems
- Higher rates of self-injury and suicide (cutting etc)
- More physical health problems
- At greater risk of violence and abuse (home is not the safe place!)
- Greater risk of being incarcerated themselves (making poor choices)

These impacts are not just a little worse when a child has a parent in prison; some of these impacts are ten times worse. A number of children have had both parents in prison.

Children who have had a parent incarcerated are at greater risk of being incarcerated themselves. Just blocks away from here at the NorthPoint Health Center, their top priority is to

counter the belief of African American youth that incarceration is inevitable. These youth have had a dad, uncle or brother that have all done time in prison they feel it is like a rite of passage.

Communication / Understanding:

The first step to establishing healthy relationships with your family members is communication in order to build understanding. Do you know what your family members went through during Your incarceration? Do they know what you went through? This conversation is a good place to start.

You may be in communication with some family members and not with others. How will you make those initial contacts? Start with one family member. Share with that person what you went through during incarceration, and ask that person to share with you what they went through while you were away. Once you have a common understanding, you can develop a plan to improve the relationship. These initial conversations may be difficult.

If communication is difficult, you could use a Circle (to bring several family members together and using a "talking piece" (like large feather) and the person with the talking piece is the only one that gets to speak. The talking piece is passed around the Circle and everyone gets several turns to speak - these events work great to also include mentors as part of the circle. The session would probably last about one hour.

A second communication technique is Active Listening and Restatement using active listening and than "restating" what you heard until a common understanding is reached.

A third technique is to replace "you" with "we" in your thinking and in your words, the 50-50 rule. Dr. Glenn Pickering stated that since all communication and relationship take at least two people, there is a shared responsibility for the outcome. There are three questions to ask when there is a misunderstanding or conflict: 1. What's your pattern? 2. What's my half of the pattern? 3. What do I need to do differently?

Relationship building is about trust.

"Trust is rebuilt when a person consistently changes their behavior and ceases to violate another's trust. Do what you say you are going to do and have integrity in everything you do. Others trusting you will follow in time." stated by Dr. Gary Chapman.

What consistent behaviors can you practice with your family that will grow trust and build healthy relationships?

- Practice skills learned at FreedomWorks such as conflict resolution.
- Keep your promises - Do what you say you are going to do.
- Practice Christ - like behaviors you learn from reading the Bible each day.
- Spend time with your children - Plan an activity according to their ages.
- Implement Steps 5-9 of your 12 Step Program where it applies with your family.
- 12 Seeds LifeSkills for Recovery for Character - for Relationships - for Life

You have made Jesus Christ the center of your new life, how can you make Jesus Christ the center of your family? IDEAS: attend church together, attended Bible study, invite to the Thursday evening Connection, attend 12-Step program like Ala-non, attend Celebrate Recovery on a weekly basis, do healthy family activities (a visit to Como Zoo, spend time in a local Park, get on the floor and play trucks with your toddler - put the cell phone away!)

The best way to test your Christianity is at home. What do you think this means?
Do you agree?

Here are some TIPS:

*Be patient. Reconciliation and building healthy relationships take time.
Consistently practice good parenting skills.
Learn how to listen to others (without thinking about your reply!)
Set goals for building healthy relationships with your family, and then work your plan, just as you have done in other areas of your life during recovery.
"I Love You" needs to be said (every day) lived, and shown in how you respond
You cannot control the outcome, but you can do your part.
Pray and trust God to do the rest.*

What Parenting Style Were You raised under?

Was it Authoritarian:

The Authoritarian Parenting Style: favoring authority, repressing individual freedom, strict, harsh, unyielding, inflexible, severe, uncompromising, by the rule, by the book. This is usually the Parenting Style many people were raised under this is what their parents knew from their own experience.

Was it Permissive:

This Parenting style just happened as both parents were busy working their jobs and other activities and the children were pretty much on their own - as far as school homework, sports activities and other school related activities.

Was it a Caring Home:

With Family Meetings to discuss family events and meals together usually in the evening to check in with each family member. Usually this also involved going to Church together on Sundays. The children had chores that they were required to do each day or weekly.

My final answer to the question of “Why is Family Matters important” comes from my work in the prisons and the many life stories I have heard. I taught Parenting classes in several of the Minnesota Prisons: Stillwater, Oak Park Heights, Lino Lakes and Rush City. I have worked with people returning from prison for 20 years.

1. Story of man who had never heard “I Love You”.
2. Story of man whose child put the note in his dad’s pocket “When is my real dad coming home?”

Schooled

STEPHANIE THOMPSON
EDMOND, OKLAHOMA

Despite reminders to put it by her backpack, my daughter, Micah, forgot her science project. “Will you drop it off at school?” she said over the phone. I’d charge a \$25 delivery fee to teach her a lesson.

I was driving to her school when I noticed red and blue flashing lights. I pulled over and opened the glove box to get my insurance. *Oh, no!* I’d forgotten to print a new certificate when I renewed online. I reached for my purse to get my license—only to realize I’d left my purse at home.

The officer went back to his police car to run my license plate.

“Where you goin’ in such a hurry?” he asked back at my car window.

I pointed to the science project.

“School. I’m charging her twenty-five dollars for the delivery,” I said. “But I’m afraid it’s going to cost me a lot more.”

“Everybody deserves mercy and grace,” he said.

I didn’t charge Micah either. Everybody deserves mercy and grace.



Not so fast, Stephanie!



Courtney appreciates a story well told.

Storybook Ending

COURTNEY HOLMES, DUBUQUE, IOWA

I’d lived in Dubuque for two years but still hadn’t found a way to get involved in the community. Working two jobs, I just didn’t have free time.

Then, last August, I took my hair-cutting tools to the Back to School Bash. I volunteered to give kids a new look for the school year. My station was next to a book stand, and one of the kids read to me while getting his trim. The next thing I knew, there was a line of 20 kids!

I gave kids my business card and told them if they came to Spark Salon, where I work, I’d give them a free haircut if they read to me. Now I do free cuts for stories the first Tuesday of every month. I ask the kids questions to make sure they understand the book and help with big words. Some of the regulars have improved their grades. Community involvement—there’s nothing like it.