

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: My husband uses a lot of sarcasm with our 7-year-old son. I don't like it. What do you think?

ANSWER: Sarcasm, directed at an individual and/or his behavior, **is always an attack.** There is always a component designed to belittle, silence and/or catch someone off guard. A 7-year-old is at best confused by it, and at worse damaged by it. Eventually, he will perceive the "attack" component of sarcasm and feel hurt. Hurt leads to anger and resentment. Colossians 3:21 tells us: "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged." Sarcasm will eventually embitter your son to his father.

If the sarcasm is used in the context of a reprimand, the embitterment and confusion your son feels towards his father will be especially damaging to their relationship. It drives a wedge between them, forcing your son to perpetually remain "on guard" around his father. It will be years before your son is your husband's intellectual equal and capable of intellectually defending himself against something as sophisticated as sarcasm. In the meantime, he will feel belittled and disparaged.

Often, sarcasm is the result of exasperation in parenting. When a parent feels inept or ineffective, he/she will often attack because feeling inept and ineffective produces anger. And, when we get angry, we want to attack. Your husband and you need to discuss and come up with a plan for how he will recognize his moments of exasperation and avoid attacking your son. One way for him to have some accountability is to apologize to your son after he has been sarcastic explaining why his action requires an apology. There is also a good chance that your husband was the victim of much sarcasm or other verbal attacks in his youth.

Because of the covert nature of sarcasm, people who use it tend to defend their actions when caught or challenged. They try to excuse it away, claiming it is a form of humor*. They tend to blame the victim for being "hypersensitive" or a "poor sport". Don't let your husband move you off course by these tactics. He will squirm when caught.

(1)Talk to your husband calmly and firmly about your concern. Sarcasm is abusive. (2) Pray with him. Sarcasm has an element of "power" that is seductively attractive. (3) Model for him ways of communicating and reprimanding that are encouraging and up-building. It may be very difficult for him to stop.

*Of course sarcasm is technically recognized as a form of high humor. In this context, we are talking about sarcasm as a dysfunctional relational style.

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