

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: Sometimes my 13-year-old's behavior just baffles me. Is there a method to her madness?

ANSWER: Although behavior many times seems random and purposeless, it never is. All learned behaviors (and most unlearned behaviors too) have a definite purpose and functionality. Behaviors can be understood **theologically** as well as **psychologically** by understanding the following existential construct:

Three categories of behavioral motivation:

1. **LOVE.** Every child longs to be loved and to love. However, every child eventually learns that love is also dangerous; hearts are scarred and broken. For some children, their life experience tells them love is unattainable. Therefore every child experiences ambivalent feelings about love. (e.g. "I deeply want love, but I also deeply fear the pains of love.") Functional psychological and theological behavioral strategies ensue.
2. **SECURITY.** Every child craves security and safety in relationships and life experiences. However, every child learns that total security is not possible. Especially around age 4, children learn that the world is not always safe. Furthermore, it is not always safe for *them*. Functional psychological and theological behavioral strategies ensue.
3. **PURPOSE.** Every child desires purpose, meaning, and accomplishment in life. However, every child learns that these things can't always be found. (e.g. "I sometimes fail, and it hurts. Sometimes I feel worthless.") Functional psychological and theological behavioral strategies ensue.

At their core, all learned behaviors are affectively functional and emotionally driven; emotions are more powerful than rational thoughts (The heart is more powerful than the brain; the affective is more powerful than the cognitive.). Behaviors are directed to answering the following three existential questions: **"What must I do to be loved? What must I do to find security? What must I do to have purpose?"** Keep in mind that these questions are a psychological construct; children don't generally walk around cognitively aware of thinking about or asking these questions, nor are they aware of the power these questions have over their behaviors and lives. (Neither are most adults!)

However, when a child's outward behavior is examined in the light of these three questions, the behavior is clearly understood.* (e.g. Think about how a shy child answers these questions.....the over-achiever.....the under-achiever.....the intellectual....the athlete.....the social butterfly.....the abused child.....etc.) As each and every child experiences life, he/she learns to find the most successful ways (in his/her mind and experience) to answer these three questions. Every child develops/chooses (One might even use the words "is conditioned to.") a "style" of relating to others and to life that facilitates the acquisition of love, security and purpose. Styles range from aggressive to passive, reckless to careful, altruistic to narcissistic, etc. If a child never or rarely experiences love, security and purpose, life is seldom worth living. **How awesome that one can find both the answer and fulfillment to these**

questions in the Good News of Jesus Christ...and live under forgiveness, grace and love, with complete security and eternal purpose!

Sadly, as sinful human beings, our children and we often find answers to these questions in this existence and in ourselves (We become our own god.). Instead of consistently turning to God to find true love, security and purpose, we often turn to ourselves, others, or things.

Now certainly, we can find a “measure” of love, security and purpose in things other than God, but they will never satisfy as completely or as perfectly. The spiritual danger is that often, they really do seem to satisfy...for a time. We incorrectly believe our deep longings and desires can be met by this world and through our own efforts. Conversely, when we find love, security and purpose in Christ first, we are then free from seeking these longings/needs elsewhere. We “get to” enjoy the temporal love, security and purpose this world can provide, but our foundation and hope rest in our relationship with God. We don’t have to wonder if or when we will have love, security and purpose; we are convinced we already have these desires and needs in Christ.

While parenting, our job is threefold: **(1) Affirm** the value of our children's longings for love, security and purpose...these are good longings and desires. We were created to have these needs perfectly met in our relationship with our Heavenly Father! **(2) Expose** the ways our children try to find love, security and purpose apart from God. We must know our children well and understand their motivation. **(3) Offer** our children true love, security and purpose by drawing them to God. We do this through the opportunities of His Word, Sacraments, service and godly relationships empowered by His Holy Spirit. What great transforming conversations and experiences we can have with our children! As parents, never forget that our example, our passion and our commitment are paramount!

You can now understand all those “baffling” behaviors. How will you respond?

* Needless to say, all adult behavior can be understood in light of these three questions too. Additional resource: Check out Kevin Huggins’ book: *Parenting Adolescents*.

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