

Trait # 1

A Successful Family Handles Emotions Well

Emotions are contagious. When Billy gets mad, the energy of that anger can spark anger in Mom. Jack is worried about the upcoming exam and Dad also feels the anxiety and become irritable. Mary feels upset when she hears her Dad and brother arguing in the other room. In all of those examples, people are connecting emotionally whether they like it or not. Emotions have the power to draw a family closer but when not handled well have the potential to create damage to individuals and distance in relationships.

In this chapter you'll learn how to help your family develop the skills to handle emotions well. Of course God has a lot to say to his church about dealing with emotions in order to have a healthy church. Paul tells the Galatians "Do not anger one another." (Galatians 5:26). He tells the Romans, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." (Romans 12:15). Peter writes in his book, "Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble." (1 Peter 3:8) Clearly, the handling of emotions well is a key to success in a family – both God's family the church, and the earthly family you live in.

When emotions flow as God intended, family dynamics are enriched. To move toward success, family members need to not only be aware of their own emotions, but must learn how to share them with others in appropriate, healthy ways. Not stuffing. Not blasting. Not ignoring, ridiculing, or minimizing their own emotions or those of others. Dealing with emotions well is one of the signs of health and there are several things you can do to strengthen your family in this important area.

In most families, one or more people have some significant work to do in emotional management. Some may even have some stubborn strongholds that prevent them from

responding in a healthy way. Most family members need help dealing with the emotions of others. Your goal is to use whatever influence you have to help everyone move in a more godly direction when it comes to handling emotions more effectively.

In unhealthy families, members with the strongest emotions control the household. Whether those emotions are expressed as tearful manipulations, silent sulking, or outbursts of vicious anger, the rest of the family is held captive. No one knows which word or which action will set off the ruling family member, even if that person is only four years old. Emotion is sometimes used as a weapon – whether tears, pouting, sighing, or anger – to force others to give in. Many people aren't malicious with their emotions; they just get overwhelmed and have poor self-management skills to handle their intensity. Some individuals have a more covert approach to their anger. Instead of exploding with rage, they use a passive aggressive response by having a bad attitude, refusing to participate in family activities, or doing a job part way. This subtle action is a quiet form of retaliation.

You'll know your family needs work in this area when you see yelling, dramatics, and other emotional outbursts as common occurrences – sometimes in the forms of stomping, grunting, or always having to have the last word. But you may see the opposite with family members escaping to safe zones, retreating until the tension diminishes to avoid emotional turmoil.

It's a problem in family life when individuals express emotions without caring how they are perceived or view their anger as justified and blame others for making them upset. If individuals use anger, mean words, or tears to solve problems then things need to change.

Recognizing the three components of an emotional episode

Emotions aren't necessarily bad. The emotion itself can be useful when harnessed well, but when misused can create volatile situations. It's helpful to break every emotional episode

down into three components and then to respond to each one appropriately. The three components are the emotion, the reaction, and the trigger.

Debra, age four, throws herself down on the floor, overwhelmed with disappointment, because Mom said no to a soft drink with her lunch. The emotion is disappointment. The reaction is throwing herself to the floor. And the trigger is not being able to have a soft drink.

Brian yells at Mom because she called him for dinner and he had to stop his video game before getting to the next level. The emotion is frustration. The reaction is yelling, and the trigger is that Mom required Brian to stop playing his video game.

When Mark teases his sister Maddie, she screams at him and slams the door. In this case the emotion is exasperation. The reaction is screaming, and the trigger is Mark's teasing.

When Mom walks into the playroom and sees the mess all over the floor, she yells at her two boys and requires them to clean it up. The emotion is anger. The reaction is yelling, and the trigger is the messy room.

Emotions can be complicated. It is often helpful to identify common triggers that spark anger or other emotions. For example, one may react angrily to correction, another to unwanted instructions. Yet another gets angry when interrupted from a favorite activity. A child may become overwhelmed when given a no answer or a parent may feel the internal heat rising when expectations aren't met.

Knowing How to Respond

Each component requires a planned response. When the emotion itself is revealed it's often helpful to acknowledge it by saying something like, "I see you're frustrated" or "you look sad." Of course, sometimes it's best to keep quiet and be like Job's friends who were just quiet at first when Job was suffering. Knowing when to make an observation about an emotion and

when to be quiet requires wisdom but most of us would do well to err on the side of acknowledging the emotion and getting it out into the open.

God has woven into each person's genetic code unique emotional distinctiveness. It's what makes a person special...or can create family challenges. Some people are so emotional that they weep at commercials or laugh easily when no one else sees the humor. Some appear to fly from one extreme emotion to another, being either overjoyed about simple pleasures or discouraged about the plight of humanity. And some appear to breeze through life with only soft waves of emotional change.

Remember that anger itself isn't wrong. We see that Jesus himself got angry in Mark 3:5 and Ephesians 4:26 says, "In your anger do not sin." It's the response from anger that can damage relationships or hurt others.

God has given some people a bigger scoop of emotions than others, and that means a greater need for skills to manage and communicate those feelings. Furthermore, each person experiences situations differently than everyone else, and emotions are part of their reality. One person sees failure as an opportunity to learn, another gives up quickly. One teen girl is happy to shop at the thrift store and be "different" from everyone else, while her sister is sure everyone is mocking her if she's not wearing something remotely current. When not invited to a party, one child will shrug it off while the other will cry as though the world has ended. When Daddy stops the car on a railroad track to look down the tracks, one child will scream with glee, the other will shriek in terror, while a third thinks the whole thing is silly or boring. One youngster gets excited about the costumed characters at Disneyland and another, frightened to tears, clings to Dad's pant leg.

All people are different and their emotional makeup is unique. It can be a tough job when a feeler meets a non-feeler. How many times does the feeler hear “You’re overly sensitive!” Or a non-feeler hears “You don’t understand!”

Some people have learned the art of manipulating others with their emotions putting others at a disadvantage. It’s important to have a plan for these intrusions lest you get sucked into the emotional escalation. On the other hand, not all emotional reactions are manipulations. Sometimes people are genuinely overwhelmed with their emotions and have poor skills and immature reactions that have a negative effect on others.

A child throwing himself on the floor to get what he wants may be deliberately manipulating the situation. Or he may simply be overwhelmed not knowing how to handle disappointment maturely.

A family has the awesome responsibility and privilege to encourage individual family members to grow into the persons God created them to be, teaching them to define and understand *their* feelings. The child who cries may become the adult with mercy and compassion. The child who is stoic may become the delegating leader who needs a fearless approach in order to manage difficult tasks. The one who becomes angry over injustice may become an advocate for the disadvantaged.

Before you can work on adjusting poor emotional responses in your family, you must first accept the reality that each person has God-given differences. It can be very hard, though, to accept someone’s emotional makeup when it’s very different than yours. For many, living in a family with others who are emotionally different is truly a cross-cultural experience, but there are ways to step into the other person’s world to develop greater understanding. (Following the X steps in chapter x on Communication chapter is a great way to begin.)

Furthermore, understanding one's own emotions can be an additional challenge. For many, feelings can bubble up without warning, without invitation, and they don't always make sense. That's why, for most families, emotions seem threatening and parents often want to shut them down as much as possible to keep peace in the home. Although that's understandable, it isn't healthy.

A second component of an emotional episode takes place when the person acts out of the emotion in some hurtful way. Most people experience anger themselves when they are hurt so a secondary reaction to the initial person's problem tends to escalate rather quickly. That's why it's so important to do what James 1:19 says, "Be slow to get angry." When someone else reacts poorly they need firmness, not harshness.

Firmness, correction, listening, caring, or teaching may be good approaches to the misuse of emotion. You might say, "I can see why you're angry. I'd be frustrated too if my soccer game were cancelled. But you're mistreating me with your anger and that's a different problem that we now have to address as well."

Or, you might say, "I'm sorry, you're upset, but I'm not going to interact with you until you can speak to me respectfully."

A young girl, four years old was obviously upset with her mother in the grocery store. She said, "I am angry! I am so angry with you mother!" Mother continued to calmly pick through the array of cheeses while her daughter continued to process what was going on. The child did not hit, pinch, or act out in any way. She did not use rude or disrespectful language. She simply voiced her anger, eventually becoming very specific in what she was angry about. "I'm so angry you won't buy me that candy!"

At that point, Mom turned to her and said, "I understand you're angry. We won't be buying candy today. It would be good if we thought about something else."

Her mother's calm demeanor and responses set a protective, safe place for this little girl to work through her anger in a way that brought her to a point of resolution. Not all children would handle that same problem in that way, but this Mom, knowing her daughter kept a good balance of maintaining her own calmness, allowing her daughter to communicate her anger, and redirecting her in an appropriate way.

When your daughter uses you as a verbal punching bag for her frustration you might say, "I'd like to help you find your lost ipod, but the way you're treating me right now is not right. I see that you're frustrated, but the way you're treating me is hurtful and needs to change."

By separating the emotion from the reaction, you'll help family members gain a clearer understanding of what's going on in their own hearts. You'll likely have to do some teaching about how to handle appropriate responses.

Sometimes it's the teenager who demonstrates more maturity in this area than the parent. Anyone can become a healing agent in a family by helping to separate emotions from the reactions.

The third component of an emotional episode is the trigger. Of course, this is what most people focus on, and they miss the other two components altogether.

Someone is angry in the other room. What's your first tendency? Many parents would respond by going into the other room to find out what started the problem. What was the trigger? The parent is on a mission to find the trigger, solve the problem, and return to life as usual. Of course, we have to solve the problem, resolve the issue, and teach others how to handle life situations but only addressing the trigger often results in inadequate change.

The Kraft family illustrates a common problem. Dad and Mom realize their family is in trouble and decide to do something about it. At age seven their son Jimmy erupts with anger

when he perceives himself to be treated unfairly or didn't get what he wanted. As a result, everyone in the family tends to walk on eggshells. Dad resorts to yelling. Mom moves in as peacemaker but ends up getting angry herself. Jimmy's twin sister tends to come to Jimmy's defense and his older brother retreats in silence to the other room. The whole family needs a plan for handling the emotional tension.

We've identified four commitments your family can make to manage emotions in a healthy way. Two deal with one's self and the other two help you relate to the emotions of others. Each individual can make these commitments, and then the family can work as a team to make these part of your family identity.

In most families one or more members aren't interested in growing in emotional maturity. They often feel like their anger is justified and it works for them. When this is a child, you can help bring about significant change. When it is an adult you'll need a lot of grace, prayer, and wisdom to initiate movement to more healthy patterns. No matter what your family looks like now, you'll want to try to encourage these four commitments with as many people as possible.

Four Family Commitments Regarding Emotions

Since most emotional outbursts are impulsive, it often takes work to retrain family members to pause before responding, think before confronting, and slow down the process instead of escalating it. It's usually best to start with yourself. As you become a student of the rich emotions God has planted within *you*, training your responses will help you teach your family how to manage emotional reactions as well.

To help your family be more successful in this very important area of family life, it's often helpful to have family discussions about emotions, talk about these different

commitments, and brainstorm ways to develop skills effectively. You'll be surprised at what wisdom can come from the members of your family as you look for solutions together. Children can be quite insightful in this area. You might ask the question, "When you're able to do well in stepping back instead of pushing forward, what is your secret to success?" Or, "What are some suggestions you have for communicating with someone else graciously when you've felt upset?" By making children part of the solution instead of the objects of the solution you often gain greater cooperation to the desired end.

The four commitments are simple enough for any family member to memorize and remember:

Own your own emotion

Pull back when upset

Communicate carefully

Respond wisely

1) Own your own emotions.

All members of a family must take responsibility for their own emotions, actions, and reactions. Some children (and parents) believe that their anger is justified simply because they are right. That is, when it comes to the issue at hand, they have truly been mistreated or someone else was wrong. They then use anger to control the situation or to get back at the person and feel justified in doing so because of the issue. But the truth is that it's not good enough to be right. You also need to be wise. James 1:20 says, "For man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires."

Here's what happens. Melissa is angry with Tim because he used her favorite shampoo to wash the dog. Melissa yells at Tim and hits him. Dad comes in to help resolve the conflict. Although it may be helpful to gather some facts to bring himself up to speed on the problem,

too many questions along this line can actually encourage Melissa's justification for her angry response.

Instead of emphasizing questions like, "What happened here?" or "Who started it?" it is usually better to let people settle down and then to ask a question requiring each person to take personal responsibility for their part of the problem. We would suggest you ask the question "What did you do wrong?" This question is designed to force all family members to accept responsibility for themselves.

Even if Melissa is a victim, the way she responds is important. Yelling and hitting are immature responses to anger and Melissa needs to learn how to solve conflict without those revenge strategies. By asking the question, "What did you do wrong?" Dad can quickly move into some solutions for Melissa for the next time her brother is insensitive. Melissa's anger may be reasonable; her response is not.

On the other hand when Dad challenges Tim he finds that he is angry too. Why? Because he didn't mean to use his sister's shampoo. She had put it into an unmarked plastic bottle to take on her sleepover and left it in the bathroom. Tim thought that it was the same shampoo that they normally use for the dog. He feels like he's innocent because he didn't intend her harm and now he's angry because she lashed out at him. After all, he says, "It was her fault."

Dad can empathize with Tim that his sister was wrong to react as she did. However, by asking the question, "What did you do wrong?" Tim acknowledged the fact that he used her shampoo. Dad was able to point out to Tim that even if he did it unintentionally, it was still wrong. He still needed to apologize to his sister.

After working with the two children independently, Dad brought them together. They both had an apology to share with the other. Dad used this first commitment to bring resolution to the situation by requiring that each person take personal responsibility.

If Susie starts screaming at Sarah in an argument over who is supposed to be doing the dishes, the anger still belongs to Susie. When Mom enters the situation she must be careful lest her own anger prompt an unwise response. It's important for her to address both the anger and the underlying issues.

Whether you try to first solve the issue or address the explosive anger depends on the situation. Likely it's best to work with the two girls separately because, by now, they will both need different solutions. Susie may be right that Sarah is shirking her responsibility but needs to know how to deal with the injustice she's experiencing. Sarah may not have had the explosive reaction but she needs to know how to deal with her sister who tends to react emotionally. Simply saying to each one separately, "Let's talk about how you handled the situation" may get things started.

One additional benefit of commitment #1 is that it can diminish the sting that often comes from the perception of being attacked. The emotionally explosive person seems to continually be on the offensive. The attack tries to place blame on the other person further complicating the issue at hand. A person who understands commitment #1 can help the person who is the object of another person's wrath to handle the situation without defensiveness. Young children need very practical, hands on tools to do this since they think very concretely. It might be enough to encourage that child to walk away or get help from an adult. Older children can learn to process this on a whole new level first by changing their own thinking in regards to the attack and then having better solutions for response.

It's especially important to help a young person know how to handle the unjust harshness of a parent. The point is that when you do the right thing when others treat you unfairly you can enjoy an internal freedom that comes from your right choice. The anger is the other person's problem.

Some parents focus on solving the problem that precipitated the anger but don't address the angry response. The result of that kind of parenting approach is that sometimes kids then get the impression that their anger is not their fault; they are simply victims of life circumstances and their anger is justified. This mistake is further compounded when a parent too enters the situation and unleashes anger.

There are better ways to solve problems than using anger. In fact, chapter X on conflict resolution can give you more ideas. The point of this chapter is to keep emotions under control and that means that all persons in a family are responsible for their own emotions and subsequent responses.

2) Pull back when upset.

When emotional tension increases, each member must look for ways to pull back instead of pushing forward and encourage others to do the same. Again, keep in mind that, in order to help others in this area of emotional management, it's usually best to work on yourself first. Kids often ride the emotional waves of their parents, so one of the ways to prevent the escalation of anger is for a parent to remain calm even though others are getting angry or upset. When it comes to anger, both children and parents have a tendency to push forward with extra energy. They want to solve the problem with anger, and that rarely works. When parents respond to a child's attack mode with a return attack, the child's aggressive approach is validated.

Some people seem to be able to reply to an angry attack with calm words easily. Others are not so fortunate. No matter what your tendency is, refuse to escalate conflict with your own tone, word choice, or emotional display.

It's often best to require the volatile person to take a Break (even if that person is you). A Break is a tool that forces a person to pull back instead of doing what they feel like doing: indulging their anger. A Break also gives you the added advantage of time to consider the best response. Taking a Break simply means requiring the person to step back and settle down before moving forward.

A definition of rage is anger out of control. The emotion is now controlling you instead of you controlling it. In those moments logical thinking is gone and the person is fueled by raw emotion. Trying to reason with a person who is that upset is often futile, resulting in further fury. Using a Break technique to settle down and be willing to work on the problem is an excellent skill that every family member must embrace.

Kara is five and throws herself on the floor because she can't watch her favorite DVD. Instead of trying to reason with Kara, Dad requires her to take a Break and settle down. Of course Kara is overwhelmed with emotion and may even say mean words or scream tempting Dad to join into the emotional turmoil. But Dad remains calm forcing his daughter to calm down before moving forward. This approach eventually teaches Kara that the solution to feeling emotionally overwhelmed is to pull back and settle down, not push forward on the wings of the emotional intensity.

Dad has learned this important lesson for himself. It used to be that he would get angry when his daughter would get angry (a very common response among most parents). He learned however that his anger wasn't bringing about the best solution. It was compounding the problem. For several months Dad had to practice the idea of pulling back when his

emotions were getting the best of him. He learned to settle down and regroup before approaching the problem. At first that took a bit of time, but with practice he was able to keep his emotions under control as he worked to help his daughter do the same.

Pushing ahead to attack or solve the problem when one is angry usually results in hurt feelings and damaged relationships. Parents and children must have strategies for dealing with the problems posed by family life. People without a plan often use anger to solve problems. With practice however, new solutions can replace old patterns. The best tool to help slow down the process of emotional escalation is to pull back when you're angry, regroup, and then solve the problem in a better way.

When someone else is upset, it's best to avoid escalating the anger by taking a Break or requiring that other person to do so. By refusing to ramp up the energy in conflict you will influence others to respond differently.

3) Communicate carefully.

Healthy families communicate their emotions in calm, straight forward, and humble ways. *Calm* means not escalating or recreating the original emotions that cause a conflict, but focusing on communication and resolution. *Straight forward* avoids sarcasm, digs, raising one's voice, and other manipulations. *Humble* reveals an attempt to understand others by talking and listening. These actions often settle emotions and provide opportunity for growth and closeness to develop.

With preschoolers who tend to kick, hit, bite, yell, or grab it's important to give them an alternative, not just correct them for doing the wrong thing. You might say to a young child, "When someone does something mean, I'd like you to say these words: "I don't like that." You might even practice with a preschooler to help change a pattern.

With older children the skill of talking instead of yelling comes through practice as well. But in this case often parents must act as counselors, listening and exploring, separating the issue from the emotion, validating reasonable feelings but challenging the reactions.

It's often helpful to ask children of any age, "How might you handle that situation better next time?" By asking that question you're focusing on the next times of life. Kids need plans. Your interaction with a child can provide the actual words to say or the way of thinking that is most productive.

Many children have poor communication skills when it comes to their emotions. You provide those skills and opportunities as you debrief or discipline a child who has lost it emotionally.

Often parents ask us, "How can I remain calm when I'm so angry?" That's a good question. It's hard to respond in a calm manner when you feel upset inside. One of the tools we suggest is that parents try to become an emotional wall when interacting with their kids under pressure. We aren't suggesting that parents never display emotion or that parents should stuff their feelings. What we are saying is that parents can learn how to go into an emotionally challenging situation and remain calm in order to help others through the challenge.

Life is therapy. Many adults today spend a lot of money on counselors and life coaches. The reality however is that life itself is therapeutic if you have a good plan. So, think of some strategies now for the next time you're in an emotionally tense situation. Then use those experiences to develop new strength in the midst of the challenge. It may take some time, but the hard work will be worth it in the end.

4) Respond wisely.

You'll want to have several tools to use in family life in order to respond properly to emotional outbursts of others and not engage in reactionary responses. Those who only have

one approach rarely find themselves successful over time. Often the solution involves some form of pull-back and then exploration of the situation with the other person.

Sometimes that effective communication comes with mirroring the emotion of another person. When a child is delighted, you likely know that you can increase emotional closeness when you mirror their delight. If a teen is sad about something that happened with friends at school it's good to mirror the sadness. In Romans 12:15 Paul reminds the believers to do the same thing with each other. He says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn."

But mirroring the emotion in some cases makes it worse. The verse above doesn't say, get upset with those who are upset, or angry with those who are angry. Some emotions are best left unshared.

When you're on the receiving end of unhealthy communication of emotions you need a plan. If you simply react to the emotion, then the escalation increases and relationships weaken. Furthermore, the people involved don't learn different ways of responding to their emotions. In fact, every family member needs a plan for the emotional antics of others. You can spend time strategizing with each family member to help develop a workable plan to relate to each other person.

In order to respond well when in the presence of emotional reactions you'll likely want to use a silent listening approach. Mom's initial response to her twelve-year-old daughter's emotionally charged sarcasm is to match the emotional challenge or even overpower her with an angry outburst of her own. Instead, Mom is learning that an initial reaction of silence, considering the options, and choosing a wiser response is usually more effective. If you are peaceful while someone is angry, that can help the other person learn how to be peaceful in similar situations and has the added benefit that it gives you time to think. Maybe that's the

kind of situation in mind when Proverbs 15:1 says, “a gentle answer turns away wrath.” Quietly pulling back in order to allow the emotion to settle a bit before coming in to do the correction can make a huge difference.

Sometimes you have to go into observation mode just to figure out what’s going on while another family member is expressing emotion. An angry explosion can blindside others and you may need some time to sort out the situation. Remember commitment #2 to practice pulling back when you feel angry yourself. This allows you to be part of the solution instead of becoming part of the problem.

Emotions are often sorted inside when a person has a chance to talk about it. By taking the time to listen you may provide the opportunity for the other person to understand more about themselves and eventually provide the tools necessary to solve the problem in a better way.

Ask open-ended questions to help you understand. Ask for details about the event that is eliciting the emotion. Listen carefully and try not to interrupt the story, but do ask those questions in places where drawing out details will give you more clarity.

Whether or not we mean to shut down our children's interaction with us, we often do it out of our own emotion of frustration missing opportunities to handle emotions well. Here are some words said that may hinder good emotional processing in family life.

“Stop crying.”

“Don’t get mad at your sister. She’s littler than you.”

“Don’t be so sensitive.”

“I don’t want to hear about it anymore. You should be over that by now.”

“You get over-excited about everything. Just calm down and be quiet.”

It's often productive to describe how the emotional reaction is impacting you and others. Firmly but graciously help the offender see why the emotional response is not helpful. "When you scream at me, I feel offended because it seems as if you're treating me like dirt and not considering how I feel in the situation." Or, "When you cry to get your way I only become irritated. When you talk to me about how you feel and share what you need or want without whining then I'm more able to listen and help you find a solution."

Don't be afraid of emotions in others. Think ahead. Examine potential reaction – positive and negative – and consciously choose the most productive action, taking in account the personality of the family member. Understanding of others often settles emotions and provides opportunity for growth and closeness to develop.

Above all, remain calm and objective in the face of strong emotions. It's easy to get swept up in the passions of someone else's dramatics. And while acknowledging your own feelings is important, keeping your cool is critical. Unless you first get a handle on your own emotional behavior, you will not be able to diffuse the emotions of others and focus on the issues or reasons behind the emotion.

Conclusion

You'll know you're doing well in this area when your family is able to express emotions in a healthy way, without using them to manipulate or dominate others. Individuals are able to feel their anger and tears, but not allow them to be manipulative nor intentionally hurtful to others. Each person understands that emotions are a window into the heart of others and looks for ways to understand and challenge in a loving way. Parents and children exercise emotional restraint in high-tension situations. Parents remain calm even when the children are not, especially when exhausted and dealing with the same issue over and over. Out-of-control behaviors connected to strong emotions are greatly reduced.

With practice every family can grow in emotional sensitivity and management. It takes work but partnering together in this area of family life can bring about significant closeness and get rid of the enemies that can rob your family of joy and peace.