

CONFLICT

requires *Finesse*

Conference speaker explains the three keys to conflict resolution.

by *Tim McAlavy*

Conflict, especially family conflict, is inevitable; but it is manageable if we employ a little finesse, says Steve Joiner, professor of ministry at Lubbock Christian University and associate director of the Center for Conflict Management.

Joiner was the keynote speaker at the 2007 Building Strong Families: Tools For Success parenting conference in Lubbock. Founded by the Lubbock County Partners for Parenting Coalition, the conference is designed for parents and professionals who work with parents in a 20-county area surrounding Lubbock.

“Avoiding conflict is a lot like legislating morality — it’s not a successful approach,” Joiner said. “Like it or not, we have to manage conflict ... especially family conflict.”

Three keys

“There are three things to remember about managing conflict: tension, relationships and concern,” he said.

Tension and anxiety are endemic to families and family relationships. Healthy tension encourages improvement, while chronic, unhealthy tension creates conflict, he said.

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“So what is the proper amount or type of tension?” Joiner asked. “It is whatever feeds a relationship without driving the participants to conflict. In that respect, tension can be a good thing in our family relationships.”

He pointed out that relationships are triangular, involving three parties. They become triangular because two parties in conflict often call in a third party to add stability to the situation.

“That third person is the person of power, the change agent,” he said. “They are not emotionally involved in the conflict. When that role is thrust on you, you need to honor that power position.

“Rise above the emotions of the conflict ... differentiate,” he continued. “Express love and concern for both parties, but don’t let go of that power position. Let both parties in the conflict be responsible for themselves and their actions. And listen impartially. Oftentimes the root of the conflict will emerge as the parties express their real concerns.”

As these concerns emerge, the change agent must remain impartial, identify the real issue and strive to find a common interest among the parties in conflict, Joiner said.

“Speak to their common interest,” he said. “Doing this will often allow a compromise or solution to emerge. I call this ‘thinking below the line of conflict.’ It’s a necessary skill for parents.”

Encourage maturity

Parents who want to minimize family conflict should encourage maturity in their children, Joiner said.

“A child’s maturity is rooted in the parents’ ability to let the child be responsible for themselves,”

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he said. “When we rush in or step in to save them from a bad choice or action, we are feeding their dependence. They have to struggle to learn responsibility, to learn how to correctly overcome difficulties, but that struggle is necessary for them to learn.”

“Helicopter” parents often encourage immaturity in their children by hovering over them. Children are as mature as their parents allow them to be. On the other hand, children shouldn’t be pushed towards adolescence too early, Joiner said.

“Establish age-appropriate boundaries for them, and watch them become healthier, more mature, as they live within the boundaries,” he said. “With maturity they will outgrow some boundaries and learn new ones. That’s challenging for parents, but very doable as long as we don’t get hung up on wanting to be liked in the relationship or pushing them to achieve a certain task.

“Try to balance relationships and tasks. ... This will encourage maturity in children and help minimize family conflicts,” Joiner said. “Above all, be a leader — one who is authentic and real, one who admits their mistakes, and one who loves them regardless of the circumstances.”

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Editor’s Note: *Tim McAlavy is associate editor/communications specialist for Texas A&M University Agricultural Communications.*