

Principle 2 : The husband and wife relationship is our children's first communication model.

Once the children arrive, attention automatically diverts to them. Yet, the centre of a family ought to be the marriage since our children actually mirror the way we relate. Thus, parenting is more about changing ourselves than our children. When husbands and wives relate to each other respectfully, our children will grow up in a safe environment and learn to relate respectfully to family members and others. As our children observe how their parents grow in marriage by resolving differences through self-changes, our children will learn likewise to develop a healthy sense of growth. Parents are continually learning and growing. To a younger child, we are stable, mature adults providing security; to the youths, we are sometimes a loyal friend.

Have you noticed that we are more courteous towards our friends than our spouse? Reason being that we expect our spouse to know us better and thus 'they should do what is expected'. We thus become less respectful, hardly thank them and often take them for granted. A story was told of a husband who fixes his neighbour's dripping faucet without delay while ignoring his wife's constant nagging to fix his own. When asked the husband said, "At least when I fix the neighbour's faucet, I get a hot cup of coffee and a thank you. When I fix mine, I only get 'It's about time!'". Imagine what model our children observe if they keep seeing frequent heated arguments, sarcasm, and cold wars between their parents. Good counsel from book of Ephesians (4:26) : "In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry." This teaches us to resolve differences each day before we sleep! Therefore it is important to build a strong marriage relationship as a good model for our children. When in disagreement, avoid arguing in front of our children but go behind closed doors to resolve the differences. Exert self-control by avoiding the urge to raise our voices.

At the end of each day, set aside a time (at least 15 minutes) to chat with our spouse about the day. Regular chat in a calm environment helps develop abilities for peaceful resolution of differences when they surface. Do this in full view of the children, explaining to them that this special time is not to be interrupted. They can either be doing their homework or playing. This cultivates children's independence and also an understanding that when authority in the home is at peace, the home is a quiet, safe place where they can belong. It also forces us not to be too preoccupied with our children and neglect our spouse's needs. Marriage is like a garden, if we do not water it daily, it dries up and catches fire easily!

What if the husband refuses to open his mouth? Guys seem to have this problem as they feel that there is nothing to talk about (it applies to wives too, if the wife is the quiet one). Actually, anyone can be engaged in a conversation with the right topic. We all courted once upon a time, right? How come it worked then? No matter how quiet a person is, there will be topics of interest. Very simply, during courtship, to 'catch the fish', we deliberately find out what interests the other party and engage them in meaningful conversation. Somehow we stopped doing it after marriage! That is taking our spouse for granted! Strengthening a marriage will not come naturally. Thoughts, effort and time are needed. Time to treat our spouse as our courting partner again.

Today's wives have increasing expectations on their husbands to participate in more house work and child rearing. While women do have every right to expect that, yet without their husbands' willing response, such expectations usually result only in endless strife. A husband who feels loved will want to take up the responsibility of loving his wife through doing varying degrees of what his wife expects. Likewise, a wife who feels loved will want to willingly submit to her husband to do what he wants. Both parties need to cooperate and not wait for the other one to start the process. Comparison with other couples in this area must be avoided at all cost. Each marriage has different expectations and responses and what works for one may not work for another. We need to adjust our expectations according to our spouse's temperaments and strengths. In the book of Thessolonians (1 The 5:18) is another good advice – "In every thing give thanks..."

Dr. Gary Chapman's love languages has a survey to take to see which of the 5 areas tops the list of when we feel loved: acts of services, quality time, encouraging words, gifts and touch. Many of you should have this from the workshop or courses you attended. However, if you need one, just drop an email to jskoh7@gmail.com. If the last time you took this survey is more than a year ago, we encourage you to do it again with your spouse. This survey will be a good start to have the daily time with your spouse. In the next few issues we will touch on strengthening marriages and tackling areas of potential conflicts like finances, differing standards of child-rearing, in-laws to build a beautiful relationship and family. They will be good topics for your time together too.