

Presentation to Fred Jan. 10, 2010

Steve Parker, M. Ed., LMFT, is the father of a disabled son, and this experience has given him insights into the stresses that parents with a special needs child face in their marriages. He advises couples to focus on their marriage as a priority, and to seek positive solutions instead of casting blame. Steve has had an Oak Park practice in individual, couple and family therapy since 1984.

Many marriages endure—*or not*—but a thriving marriage requires conscious effort on the part of both partners, he said.

“It really does take attention,” Steve said. “It is very important to be awake to the principles you want to guide you in the relationship. Those might be kindness, love and respect. These are the principles that you apply in every situation. The most important thing is to be conscious.”

Steve was trained as a special education teacher and was principal of a day treatment center for kids with behavior problems when his son was born. By the time his son was 2, Steve and his wife knew he had significant disabilities. Now 26, Steve’s son is now able to read at a 2nd grade level, but is unable to count money and is unlikely to ever live independently. This forced a reassessment: Steve and his wife would never be empty nesters. What would retirement look like with a dependent adult child? How would they provide for their son after their deaths?

“One of the great problems my wife and I have to deal with is ‘how do you love and accept your child exactly as they are, while wanting them to be different?’” Steve said. Ultimately, they have come to a Buddhist-like acceptance that their son’s disability “just is.” That acceptance allows them to move forward.

A challenge for parents of a severely disabled child is staying focused on their marriage when the child’s issues often dominate life. Creating a thriving marriage in the face of these challenges “really boils down to ‘how passionately do you want it?’” Steve said.

Steve advocates “solution thinking.” Instead of talking about what is wrong in a relationship, or they what they don’t want to happen over and over, he advises couples to focus on what they do want to happen.

“Saying what you *don’t* want does not imply what you *do* want,” he said. “Develop a language that begins to describe the relationship you want to have. Don’t focus on what you are dissatisfied about as much as what you want to be doing instead.”

Marriages start out couple-focused, but when children are born, the marriage often takes a back burner. Too often, the marriage doesn’t come off the back

burner as kids get older or, in the case of a disabled child, as parents cope with extraordinary challenges.

Many marriages are very reactive and emotionally driven. In these relationships, couples respond emotionally to frustrations and conflicts, often creating a negative 'dance' that becomes a habit. These negative patterns can also exist between parents and children.

"If a relationship is emotionally driven, when I am angry, you will get my anger in unkind and destructive ways," Steve said. "You may respond with anger and then two things can happen—the one of us shuts down or the argument escalates.

"One of the most important skills you can learn is the ability to stop, to recognize that you have been emotionally triggered," he said. "You have to have a conscious intent to do something different. There are habits that form in relationships, and people learn to be reactive to each other."

A mother asked how to stop a pattern in which a daughter seemed to set off conflict between the parents.

"I would be watching a whole family dance," Steve said, "and I would try to figure out, 'what is being triggered in you or your husband? What sets you off at each other?' As a priority, you have to decide, 'We are going to be partners, and we're going to support each other.'"

Recognizing that a familiar sequence of actions and reactions has begun can help partners to take responsibility for their role and stop the dance. But one partner cannot make his/her words or actions dependent on the other partner's response or they won't break out of the pattern of an emotionally driven relationship.

"My being kind and respectful to you cannot depend on your being kind and respectful to me, or else it is reactive," Steve said. "That escalates the struggle to the point-counterpoint stage, and that only leads to shutting down or escalation."

A father said he was raised in an emotional family, and notices that "kids can raise the emotional heat in a situation, and then I react in an emotional way." Steve cautioned against assuming that kids intentionally cause conflict between parents, but said kids do seek emotional intensity.

"One solution is to recognize that you have a choice in your reaction," Steve said. "You can become conscious, intentional, deliberate. Even 5 steps into your reaction, you can stop and become intentional. Anger does not bring about the kind of relationship you really want. We should be approaching from the principle of 'I need to be kind and respectful.'"

Partners can develop a way of discussing the way things need to change. “It’s becoming the person you want your partner to be and being conscious of what your contribution in the relationship is. Everything you do, every gesture, is an invitation. The question is, ‘What’s your invitation? What are you trying to invite?’”

Doing something different can disrupt emotionally-driven negative patterns.

“If you don’t know what to do or say in the moment, just say, ‘let me get back to you,’” Steve said. “The most important thing is to recognize that you have the ability to pause and do things differently. And you have to do it first—you can’t wait for your partner to do it differently.”

One effective way to end patterns of conflict is to be curious instead of judgmental. “If you can approach your partner from a place of curiosity, it allows you to ask questions. If your spouse says ‘You’re not there for me,’ instead of getting angry and saying ‘I work hard to bring home money for our family and you say I’m not there?’ you could ask why your spouse feels that way. You need more information to get to a solution.”

One parent noted that we often resolve problems much more creatively and respectfully in a work environment. Steve agreed and framed it this way: “If your husband or wife were a multi-million-dollar deal, how would you respond to them? You have to think of your marriage and your relationship as sacred. You can’t lose sight of that.”

Too often parents of special needs children get into reactive patterns with their children. Children thrive on emotional intensity, particularly children with extraordinary sensory needs, such as kids with ADHD, autism and other diagnoses.

“If we respond to children with a certain intensity, that reinforces their behavior,” Steve said. This also conveys too much power to the child. “You can’t allow your child to be in charge of your emotional wellbeing. If you do, you have bestowed too much responsibility for a child.”

Families often become so child-focused, that parents don’t make their relationship a priority and they don’t communicate to their children that they are important as a couple. This is important to model this for our children, Steve said. Instead of telling kids that parents need to go out to get away from the children, you can show that your marriage is a priority by explaining that you are going out because you really enjoy time together.

To actively nurture a marriage, Steve advocates expressing love and gratitude for our spouses and showing generosity in small ways. “What nurtures a relationship isn’t going out to dinner or a hotel. It’s how you nurture on a daily basis. It’s leaving a loving message on an answering machine, leaving a note,

doing that person's job at home, listening, asking how your partner is feeling. These are ways you connect that don't require grand planning. These small gestures are so important."

A mother asked how a couple might balance the competing demands of a disabled child who may never live independently, stressful jobs and demanding parents. "I would ask, 'What are your priorities?'" Steve said. "It's about learning new ways to respond to these stresses. You don't have to cut people out of your life or quit your job, but it's important to learn to set boundaries and limits.

"You and your husband can recognize your challenges and decide, 'We're best friends in this. We have to work together.' That might meet deferring retirement or some other adjustment."

Steve said he and his wife recognize "the importance of sharing anxiety," but have learned not to descend into despair together. If one partner is despairing, it is important for the other partner to validate, but also to be reassuring. Being reassuring in such a moment is an act of generosity.

"Don't join each other in that fearful, black place," he cautioned. "That's quicksand. As a couple, it's a determination that we're both not going to go there at the same time."

Couples often recreate the patterns of conflict they observed growing up. The biggest part of a solution is to recognize you could do things differently, Steve said. "You want to be awake to the other possible ways of reacting. You have to consciously decide, 'I want to treat my spouse differently.'"

When you stop the autopilot, you can consider a different choice, Steve said. "You can decide, 'I want to practice kinder and more respectful, I want to practice calm.'" Steve said. "The victory is to approach a problem differently."

He advised couples to ask themselves 'What is our vision of a thriving marriage? What is our vision of a thriving family? What would that look like given who our family is?'"