

The value of being an encouraging parent

His birth name was Joseph, yet the disciples nicknamed him Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement (Acts 4:36). He travelled alongside Paul during his first missionary journey, which proved to be a driving force of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire.

Without Barnabas, would Paul and the disciples have been too discouraged to continue their missions? Though we don't know why they nicknamed him Barnabas, maybe it was because he gave others confidence, cheering them on and making them smile when the challenges became tough.

The need to be encouraged

We all, especially children, need an encourager by our side. As the only child of a single mother, I yearned for encouragement, and my mum provided it. "You can do anything you set your mind to," she said. And when I found my passion of the week, my mum encouraged me every step of the way. From ballerina to lion tamer, from veterinarian to neonatologist, I heard my mum speak words of confidence over me.

Standing with me as she washed the dishes, she encouraged me to go to college. While folding clothes on our creaky orange couch, she provided support for my fledgling singing career. She was always busy yet had time to speak to me, sustain me and be my Barnabas.

Keep in mind that my mother wasn't my only encourager. The girl down the street encouraged me to smoke a cigarette for the first time. My boyfriend had his own ideas when I was 16. There were countless others I do not care to recall. Who is encouraging your children?

Children value your opinions

Mothers and fathers do not always realize that their children value their opinions. Your teenager may listen to their friends most of the time and pretend they don't know you in public, but when it matters, they will remember words you've poured into them.

The impact you have is crucial. "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24). When times are tough, a word of love can bring you around the corner of despair into faith and light. A kind word from a parent builds a foundation. A harsh word crumbles it. Damage from the lack of family encouragement may take years to mend.

Start early

Encourage children from the very beginning. A three-year-old girl should know you believe in her. Your eight-year-old boy should be free to dream of becoming the next great pro football player. It is never too late to begin encouraging your children. Young or old, they love to know you are confident of who they are.

From the absurd to the surreal to the quite ordinary, a person's dreams are part of his or her identity. Don't erase them. Water them. Let them see the sunlight and stretch forth to heaven to be fertilized by God.

Be a Barnabas. Let your children know that when times are tough, you will stand with them, cheering them on. For the more subdued parent, a simple "I got your back" is just as effective.

Sitting here reminiscing on all the funny things I wanted to be when I grew up makes my heart smile. In fact, if I called her today, my mum would still tell me I can do anything I set my mind to do.

"Therefore encourage one another and build each other up" (1 Thessalonians 5:11). We all need a Barnabas. And as you live out the Barnabas way to your children, they in turn will be a Barnabas to others.

© 2008 Focus on the Family. All rights reserved. International copyright secured. Used by permission.