

Lutheran Marriage Encounter

POST WEEKEND RESOURCE

FAMILY DIALOGUE

Any family is happier and more harmonious if they can communicate well. But, have you ever noticed something? No one tells you HOW. They say, "Family communication is important," but they don't tell you HOW TO DO IT.

A new step-by-step technique called Family Dialogue shows you how. It shows your family how to talk to each other, understand each other, enjoy each other.

Briefly, at a Family Dialogue, the family sits in a circle, joins hands, and starts with a prayer. Then each family member reads a letter he has written to the family, all on the same topic. (Those too small to write draw pictures, which they explain). After each member of the family has read his letter, there is time for reaction feelings and discussion. The family then chooses its topic for the next session, and the dialogue closes with a prayer.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? We learned about the technique during a weekend experience called Marriage Encounter. Taking a full weekend like this is a great way to learn to "communicate." Many workshops in communications are available, ranging from a family retreat through your local church to a training course in how to be an effective parent. (Some possibilities are listed in next month's article, along with pertinent addresses.)

However, even though we learned about Family Dialogue during a full weekend session, we realized not everyone has this opportunity. Could we tell people about how great Family Dialogue was anyway? It was just too good to keep to ourselves! It is simple, it brings joy, and it really works!

Step by step, here is what you do.

PREPARING FOR DIALOGUE

1. HEADS TOGETHER

The first step is for the husband and wife to sit down and read this article completely. Discuss it. Agree to try it. One parent can't force participation in the program, both must be fully committed. You need to be a united team, working together to bring more joy and closeness into your family life.

2. BRIEFING THE FAMILY

After you are in agreement, call an informal family conference. Be sure everyone in the family is there.

Family means every person living under your roof, from grandparents to the new baby. Even our dog's in ours!

Have both parents explain roughly what they would like to do. Expect loud groans, especially from your teenagers, if you have any. Hold firm, and set the date and time for the first Family Dialogue. (Ours started regularly on Sunday nights at 6 p.m.)

Be flexible in choosing this time, but come to a consensus. A definite time has to be set that is possible for everyone. (Keep the thought foremost that everyone is going to be grateful someday that you had the vision to start this!)

3. NOTEBOOKS

When you are at the store some time during the next several days, choose your Family Dialogue notebooks. The family doesn't have to do this together. Just be sure that each child and each adult has a specific notebook that is only for Dialogue. Let each child choose his own, and have him put his own name on it. It should be bigger than a notepad - a school spiral is fine. Keep these books all together in a central place, not scattered all over the house or under the beds. (Ours are always on our living room coffee table.)

THE ACTUAL DIALOGUE

Step 1. The Dialogue Circle

When Family Dialogue time comes, sit together on the floor to begin. Senior citizens in the household may find this difficult, so find your own best location. If at all possible, though, try the floor. It seems to put the parents and kids on the same level. It is closer together than all sitting around the kitchen table - there is no impediment between you. Plus, kids have more room to wiggle and are less distracting.

If you have two children that frequently clash, put a parent between them. Okay, is everyone sitting on the floor? Now everybody holds hands.

"Wait a minute," I can hear you saying. "No way, in our family." Do you think your teenager will refuse? Well, you may be right.

Let's stop and consider this a minute. Why does he or she refuse? Why won't he hold hands with his own family? He is uncomfortable, isn't he? Your teenager may even be mad at the family, not willing to hold hands with them. Not even willing to enter into "this whole dumb project."

If he refuses, he has a reason. There may be lots of pent-up fury and alienation there. Okay, what are you supposed to do about it, give up? No! Family Dialogue is the first step towards finding out why your teenager is angry. It is the first step towards healing family tensions. Are you going to back off? No. Persevere.

When you are all sitting down and you ask the family to hold hands, if someone refuses, look directly at him or her and ask quietly if they will please just try it. You may want to add a brief prayer here to relax tensions.

Now, Dad gives a short explanation of the agenda. (In this description, I have used Dad as the leader. However, if there is no father in your household, or another pattern seems more natural to you, have someone else take Dad's role.)

Step 2. OPENING PRAYER

Dad starts the opening prayer, while you are all holding hands, and then anyone is welcome to chime in. If someone prefers to pray silently at this point, that's okay too.

When our family does this, my husband asks for grace, for acceptance of each other in our Family Dialogue. He shows in his prayer that he is a child of God too, trusting and needing help from God. This crumbles the Domineering Parent image, and opens the way for communication for the kids.

Sometimes you may want a song as your "opening prayer." Whatever you prefer, when the prayer is done, Dad says Amen. The sharing begins.

Step 3. SHARING LETTERS

A question has been chosen in advance. Each person has written (or drawn) his own letter in answer to the question, and each reads his letter to the family. The letters are as descriptive as possible.

For example: "How do I feel about Christmas?" (We did this early in the holiday season.) Each person writes this question in his book and then, at his own pace, answers it. We have found that our younger child needs to write in her book early in the day, so she won't feel pressured for time. My husband and I, however, often write just shortly before the Family Dialogue time. It should take an adult only 10 or 15 minutes. A page or so is fine.

The answers you could write to the above question may range anywhere from "hassled" to "all excited." The point is: let yourself go! Reveal how you REALLY feel about it. Does it make you feel like whirling for joy? Do you still lie awake Christmas Eve for hours, little butterflies in your stomach? Say exactly how you feel. Listen to yourself inside. If a picture flashes into your mind, include it.

In one of our children's letters, when we looked back together, she described her excitement, her happiness at the "together time," her appreciation of the unusual harmony at home, the freedom she felt with twelve days off from school, and the beauty of the snow "like a blanket outside, so smooth and nice."

Our other daughter, only seven, conveyed how she felt about Christmas by writing, "I feel all excited and jumpy!" She listed all the things she was anticipating so keenly, and my husband and I met eyes across the circle in a flood of intense remembering about how it felt to be a child during a beautiful Christmas. She really got through to us.

If your child is too young to write, have him or her draw a crayon picture of her feelings. The choice of colors and the pictures drawn may be quite descriptive. The child can hold up her picture and tell everyone about it: how the black slashing lines show anger, etc. The beauty of the children reading their own letters is that you have no spelling, punctuation, or penmanship problems. Even if a child spells a word in his own creative way, at least he knows what it says, when it is time to read it.

After everyone has read their letters, pause. This is Reaction Time.

Step 4. REACTION FEELINGS

Have Dad explain that anyone is welcome to tell how he feels right now. Our youngest is the most spontaneous and is generally the first to blurt out how she feels.

I remember once when I shared a letter full of real exasperation. All the fury and foot-stomping frustration poured out. There was a heavy pause after all the letters, and then Reaction Time. Missy looked at me with such big eyes and said earnestly, "Boy, I had no IDEA you felt like that! That's just the way I feel, sometimes, like when Kathy teases me. Agghhh! It's awful!"

The connection was made. She saw me clearly as a person. I had ups and downs and hopes and fears and frustrations, just like she did. I wasn't a Mother, a separate breed of animal, inexplicable to her youthful mind. I was human, just like her! We touched and understood each other in the deepest sense.

This is the purpose of Family Dialogue. Some people call it "communication." I call it wonderful.

After each person has read his letter, there are usually a lot of jumbled feelings floating around, like "Boy, I know what she means by that!" "Why did he say that?" "I really feel mad that she said that. That really ticks me off!" "Oh dear, the poor child. She must be feeling so awful. I had no idea . . ."

In Reaction Time we air these feelings, get them out in the open. Since no one can understand what is going on if everyone starts telling his feelings at the same time, try and hear everyone's "off the top-of-my-head" reaction in turn, and then CHOOSE one single feeling to have the family concentrate on.

Step 5. "MICROSCOPE" ON ONE PERSON'S FEELING

Now, this is where it take a little discipline at first, and some practice, to get the hang of it. You have all these reactions floating around in your dialogue circle, right? Seize on one of them. Grab it and examine it, as if you were peering at it under a microscope, each family member having a look.

Sound weird? We wondered, too, but don't quit now - you are almost home-free.

This can be done gently and naturally. Turn your attention to one person in the family and draw him out about some strong reaction he has expressed. For instance: "Oh no, we aren't going to Grandpa's for Easter again!"
"You feel this is a bad idea, Chuck?"
"Not again! You said last year."
"You sound annoyed, Chuck."
"You bet I am!"
"How annoyed?"
"I feel like getting up and slamming the door! I feel like..."

Okay, you may think you have a tiger by the tail, but try to have each family member glimpse what Chuck is feeling inside. Have them relate to it on their own terms, like:

"I know how he feels, Dad. That's how I feel when the boys snatch my hat and toss it all over the school bus. Ooooo, it makes me so mad!"

"Yes, and that's how I feel when Mrs. Smith lectures me about what I should have bid on bridge night."

Of course, the problem about the Easter trip can be discussed fully, soon, but for right now, during Reaction Time, each person tries to feel just the way Chuck feels.

Why Don't We?

One of our most beautiful Family Dialogues covered the question, "How do I feel about having Mike ('Daddy') in our family?" (For Mike, it was "How do I feel about being in this family?") As our daughter sat there quietly reading her own words of admiration for her father, her own examples of how special he was to her as a person, her own innermost thoughts to him, her love for him . . . well, Mike was unable to speak.

Wistfulness rushed over me. How I wished I had had the chance to say this to my father! Why do we so rarely tell these things to people we love?

Other Suggestions:

As you gain experience, you might try prefacing each letter with what we call "specialness." You write something that is special and good about each member of the family at the beginning of your letter.

You might want to preface your letter with a written prayer, too. This gets you into the mood for writing a really good loving letter to your family.

As the trust builds among you, begin to tackle the tough questions. Your teenagers may not even let you wait this long. They may sound right out, loud and clear. Pray a lot before these tough dialogues. Stress acceptance, reconciliation.

Do not permit name-calling or personal attacks. The best way to avoid things getting out of hand is to keep repeating that each person is to describe only his own feelings. He is not to mention anyone else's name. Only "I feel frustrated, I feel happy . . ." etc. For example, suppose you have a question like "How do I feel when my sister (or 'the children') and I tease and fight?" Each child describes his or her own feeling of frustration, his feeling of loneliness, or his feeling of fear, etc. They are not permitted to say, "Janet is a meanie and a rat-fink." That is a judgment. It leads to total disarray. Each person must express his or her OWN feelings.

Don't leave out the prayers in your Family Dialogue. No matter where you are in your faith, you are going to need that extra Help. The prayers seem to surround the Family Dialogue circle with a gentleness and love that makes true communications possible. You can almost feel this gentleness around you. Without it, the Family Dialogue could quickly fall apart due to human flaws. Prayers before and afterwards are essential.

Surprise!

What if you don't like their feelings? What if you want to push away what you hear?

Here we come to a central idea that must be understood for the Family Dialogue to work: feelings are neither right nor wrong. Feelings are.

Your daughter is not wrong because she gets angry about something. Her anger is inside her and she cannot turn it off just because it makes you uncomfortable. It's there. It's part of her. If you try and shut her up, she will resent it, won't she? Yes, and all communication will be stifled.

STEP 6. MICROSCOPE, AGAIN

Another example: "Gee, I feel good about Mom's letter."

"How 'good,' Julie?"

"Well, all cozy-like, like it is nice and snuggly here, and loving and safe and warm."

"Like when you are under lots of warm covers and it is very cold outside?" "Yea ...

"Or, like after we had our fire alarm but our house didn't burn down, and then we were all sitting together watching a good TV program, and I had the afghan around you and me, Julie?"

"Yeah, like that. All safe and warm."

You see? Each member of the family "identifies" with Julie. They "understand" her. She has "communicated" with them.

Something about this process lowers the barriers between people. They touch and become closer. This is the key to the whole thing. It works with any kind of feeling, too. It is the same thing that happened when Missy identified with her mother's foot-stomping, exasperated feeling. Communication!

STEP 7. DISCUSSION

After the family has tried to identify with one strong reaction, you generally drift into a free-for-all discussion. This can go on for any length of time. When it begins to get ragged, or the kids begin to get restless, either parent can suggest you close with a prayer. Before you do, though, choose the question for next week's Family Dialogue, same time, same place.

STEP 8. CHOOSE NEXT QUESTION

It helps if there is general participation in the choice of dialogue questions, not a Heavy Parent dictating. We have found though, that timely topics are the best questions, like "Should we buy a camper, and how does that make me feel?"; "How do I feel about Buddy going away to college?"; etc.

STEP 9. CLOSING PRAYER

Dad starts the closing prayer. Anyone can contribute. If no one else does, either parent could express gratefulness for the good points of that particular Family Dialogue: the closeness we feel, the new things we have learned about each other, a family choice made, our acceptance of each other, all the love we feel in the room, etc. Believe me, you will find yourself thanking God for each of these things, as your Dialogue grows!

When Dad says Amen, the Dialogue ends. Get up and stretch! Our family dog even gets up from the center of our circle and ambles away nonchalantly. Yes, she attends nearly every Family Dialogue. Her aristocratic bearing makes her pretend that she just happened by, and felt like curling up in the circle's center. This shows us how close our circle brings us, for even the dog senses it and doesn't want to be left out.

The point we are working towards is understanding, right?

In the same way, your feelings must be accepted by your daughter (and every other person in the family). If an orderly house makes you feel good, and a jumbled house makes you feel jumbled inside, your daughter must be willing to accept this. You cannot turn off your jumbled feeling - it's there, it's part of you. Your daughter must see you as you are, right then.

Accepting Each Other

This is an eye-opening concept. If you and each member of your family constantly remind each other, "feelings are not right or wrong, feelings just are . . ." you will find yourselves listening with new interest to each other. You no longer have the urge to edit and control each other. You realize you have no right to do that, it's manipulation. You are beginning to just listen, and accept each other as you really are.

This is a great step forward in communication. You begin to see each person as a unique human soul, with needs and fears and loves.

Each family is unique, too, and responds in its own way to this project. In every single case I have encountered, though, (and I've seen scores of families do this), there has been benefit from the increased communication.

It may be rocky for a while, as your family faces its conflicts and works them out. But at least you are working towards a solution. Good for you!

How can I urge you most effectively to try Family Dialogue? It's like having tasted something wonderful and trying to persuade your friend to try it. He doesn't know what he is missing!

A Proven Technique

Which path is your family headed down: striving for closeness with each other, or the busy modern world path that leads to separate ways?

What are you going to do about it?

Here is an effective, proven method for increasing joy and closeness in your family. Give it a try!

(Cut this out and tape in dialogue notebook.)

1. Dialogue Circle
2. Opening Prayer
3. Sharing Letters
4. Reaction Feelings
5. "Microscope," Again
7. Discussion
8. Choose Next Question
9. Closing Prayer

Keys:

Share only your own feelings.

No name-calling.

Accept others' feelings.

Reach out, in love.

Include God.

Our Family Dialogue Questions:

1. How do I feel when I give presents?
2. What did I like and dislike about our vacation, and how does that make me feel?
3. How do I feel when it snows? (rains, heat wave, tornadoes)

4. How do I feel about going to church?
5. How do I feel about having company for dinner?
6. How do I feel about our family dialogue, so far?
7. How do I feel about getting kissed goodnight? (good for younger children)
8. How do I feel right now?
9. How do I feel about summer vacation?
10. How do I feel about visits to grandparents? (Or, other relatives)
11. What animal am I like, and what animal is each one in our family like, and why?
12. What is my best quality, and how does that make me feel?
13. What was the best thing about this weekend, and how does that make me feel?
14. How do I feel when Mommy gets sick? (Or, Daddy)
15. How do I feel about Advent, lighting our Advent candles, etc.?
16. How do I feel about Christmas coming?
17. What did I like best about Christmas, and how did that make me feel?
18. New Years: What were the highlights of last year for me? For our family? How does this make me feel?
19. New Years: What would I like to see next year for us as a family, and how does that make me feel?
20. What is one New Year's resolution I made for myself and how does that make me feel?
21. How do I feel about going camping?
22. How do I feel about having Mike (Daddy) in our family? (Mike: How do I feel about being in this family?)
23. How do I feel about having Betsy (Mom) in our family? (Betsy: How do I feel about being in this family?)
24. How do I feel about having (child's name) in our family? (Child: see above.)
25. What do I like best about our family, and how does that make me feel?
26. What do I like best about some other family in our neighborhood and how does that make me feel?
27. How do I feel about the electric power blackout?
28. How do I feel about having our new camper home?
29. How do I feel about our TV being broken?
30. How do I feel about spring vacation?
31. What was my very favorite family dialogue, and why?

Other Family Dialogue Questions:

1. What was my most exciting feeling today, and how did that make me feel?
2. How do I feel when someone in the family helps me?
3. How do I feel when a friend helps me?
4. How do I feel when I receive a compliment from someone in our family?
5. How do I feel when I receive a compliment from someone outside our family?
6. What is the meaning of my birthday to me? How does this make me feel?
7. What is the meaning of Thanksgiving to me, and how does this make me feel?
8. What is the meaning of Mom's and Dad's anniversary to me, and how does it make me feel?
9. What are my feelings as the new school year begins?
10. What are my feelings when I am asked to cut back or do without?
11. What is the most important thing that happened to me this week, and how does that make me feel?
12. What are my feelings about (child's name) becoming more independent?
13. When do I feel closest to all of you, and how does that make me feel?
14. What are our (your) faults as parents, and how does that make me feel?
15. What are our (your) good qualities as parents, and how does that make me feel?
16. In what ways can you children (we) help? How does that make me feel?
17. What can we do to make our family life better? How does that make me feel?
18. How do I feel about going to bed at night?
19. How do I feel when Mom yells?
20. How do I feel when Dad gets mad at us?
21. How do I feel about going to school?
22. How do I feel when Dad gets home from work?
23. "A man travels the world over in search of what he needs, and returns home to find it."

-George Moore