

# Raising Kids Who Care

## Session 5: Self Esteem & Failure

### Opening Prayer

*Pray the following words aloud together:*

Creator God,  
we come before you today  
to reflect more on our role as parents.

We need your wisdom about  
how to teach our children they are loved  
regardless of what they do or how they perform.

We need the courage to allow them to fail  
and learn consequences for themselves.

We need guidance so that we can teach them  
to look beyond themselves to others.

Guide our conversation  
so that we can hear your voice.

We ask this in Jesus' name.

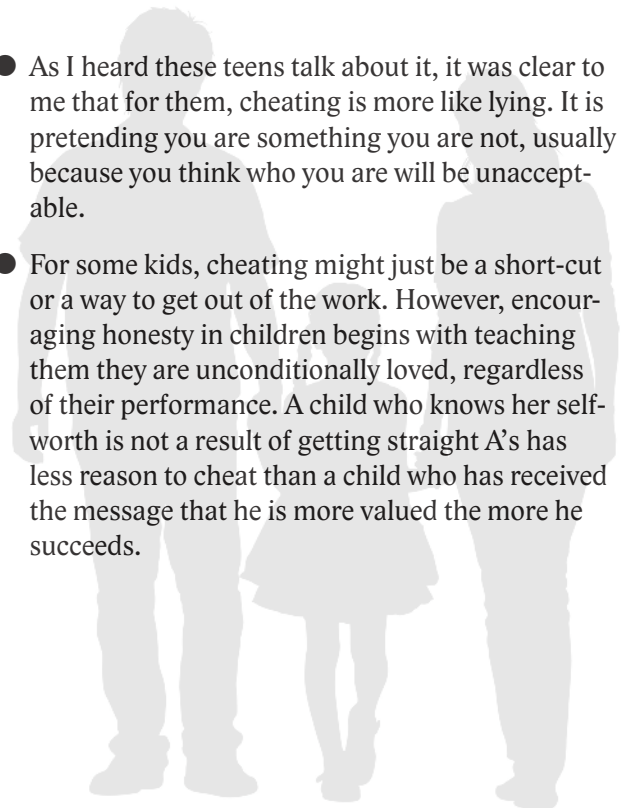
Amen.

### Sometimes It's Good to Fail

*Read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each participant read one paragraph at a time to the whole group, continuing around the circle.*

- I recently asked a group of teens who chose not to cheat on a high school test what the factors are that cause students to cheat. A common theme in all of their answers was a poor self-image. They expressed that people who feel good about themselves have no need to convince others that they are something that they're not.
- As one 17-year-old explained, "I failed AP Chemistry. That doesn't make me a bad person, or even a dumb one. It just means I can't do AP Chemistry. If I cheated, I could have passed, but I would still know I can't do it. It would have just kept other people from knowing. And then they would expect even more of me."

- As I heard these teens talk about it, it was clear to me that for them, cheating is more like lying. It is pretending you are something you are not, usually because you think who you are will be unacceptable.
- For some kids, cheating might just be a short-cut or a way to get out of the work. However, encouraging honesty in children begins with teaching them they are unconditionally loved, regardless of their performance. A child who knows her self-worth is not a result of getting straight A's has less reason to cheat than a child who has received the message that he is more valued the more he succeeds.



- Part of growing up is learning to set reasonable and realistic expectations for ourselves and having those expectations respected and supported by the significant adults in our lives. As painful as it might be, a big part of growing up is learning to live with failure. A child needs to learn to accept the fact that she isn't a chemistry wiz if that is not her gift, rather than have her ego soothed when he doesn't get the expected A.
- Our children need to know that we're interested in them and in how they are learning and changing, not just in the grade that a teacher assigns to that learning. Just as children can't learn to walk without falling many times, children won't develop a realistic sense of self, honest self-reflection, and humility if they aren't allowed to fail at other things. As parents, we need to guard against our instinct to protect our children from failure.
- One nine-year-old softball player was so used to being the best player on the field that when she struck out at the plate she would instantly dissolve into tears and throw her bat upon returning to the dugout. A wise 12-year-old in the stands could be overheard saying "She needs more practice striking out!"
- It is also important to foster perseverance in our children, rather than always doing what we can to make life easier for them. Megan takes piano lessons even though she regularly complains about how hard they are. Because school and sports come easily to her, her parents want her to have the experience of humility and having to work hard at something and still not be the best.
- Moral development is not simply about building a child's self-esteem or self-image, although this is vital and happens through the ways we love and affirm our children. Along with a strong sense of self, we need to support children's growing maturity—their ability to take in constructive criticism, realistically accept their gifts and shortcomings, and learn humility and generosity in relationship with others.
- One public elementary school sponsors an annual "Different Abilities Week" in which able-bodied children move through stations designed to teach them what some children with disabilities struggle every day of their lives. Then the mainstreamed kids are paired up with others in the special education classrooms for lunch and recesses. Afterward, teachers report that the "able-bodied" children are less likely to tease and poke fun at the special ed. children, and they are more thoughtful and inclusive of their peers moving forward.
- Moral development, then, is about reminding our children that they are deeply loved, by God and by us, because of who they are, not what they achieve. Children who are respectful, honest, resilient, generous, and kind are a reflection of strong moral development, regardless of their grades or batting average.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① Would you say your children have a strong sense of self-esteem or not? How would you like to see them grow in this?
- ② Is it difficult to let your children struggle and fail at anything? In what areas might it be fruitful for them to struggle a bit more? Put another way, in what areas might they benefit from learning some humility?
- ③ Do you tell your children stories of failures in your own life? If not, which story of failure might you share with them?

# Are You Telling the Truth?

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- Fifteen-year-old Ricky hated going to school. He also happened to have chronic asthma, and often used this quite effectively to skip classes in middle school. One weeknight evening, Ricky fell off of a ladder and he complained about pain in his leg later that evening and the next day. Ricky's mother was familiar with some of his excuses to miss school, so she sent him on the bus anyway.
- Before she even left for work, Ricky's school called, and the school nurse thought he should get an x-ray. His mother reluctantly took him to the hospital, where he was later admitted with a fractured tibia. Years later, his mother was still berating herself for sending her son to school with a broken leg.
- All of us want to believe our children, and we know it is troubling when a child's word can't totally be trusted. Lying, though, is a coping skill, and children learn it as they are acquiring other common skills, such as sharing or following rules in a game. Children need to learn more effective and healthy coping skills so that lying doesn't take their place.
- Psychologists recognize three kinds of lying: protective lying to avoid blame, aggressive lying to hurt another, and fantasy lying to enhance one's prestige. Since lying is a coping skill, recognizing the problem (real or imagined) that the child is facing may offer the opportunity to suggest better ways of coping.
- Protective lying occurs when the child feels threatened and assumes that it is better to lie and risk getting caught than to accept a punishment. A parent or teacher who says sternly, "Who did this?" is likely to be met with silence, an effort to blame someone else, or a manufactured story.
- Recognizing what has gone wrong and suggesting alternative methods for dealing with it can offer children a safety net and the chance to take responsibility for their actions. The more serious the offense, the greater the need for protection and suggestions for positive ways to move forward.
- If children grow up with a healthy sense of culpability that helps them acknowledge that a problem is their responsibility and a sense of self that lets them know they are capable of repairing the damage, then they will have developed a better coping skill than lying.
- Children need to know that truth is more important to us than great accomplishments. We can point out to them that although some people lie when caught in a tough situation, the truth always takes courage but will ultimately win respect.
- A strong self-image is the greatest defense against fantasy lying. With a young child, the truth needs to be pointed out clearly, without blaming or accusations. With older children, we can help them understand that they are good and worthy of love simply because they are created in the image of God. They do not need to do anything to earn this love.
- Aggressive lying is the easiest for children to recognize as morally wrong. Hurting another's reputation or character is not much different from hurting someone physically. We need to respond with a firm example, reacting just as strongly to aggressive lying as we would to physical fighting.
- It is far more effective, whenever possible, to avoid giving children the opportunity to lie than it is to punish them after the fact. If you know a child is lying, confront him or her with the truth rather than asking the question that may produce another lie. Most importantly, though, we can affirm children for telling the truth, particularly in situations where we know it is difficult. You can also tell stories of heroes who told the truth in the face of difficult situations.
- Honesty is often taught indirectly. Teaching children to take responsibility for their mistakes or failures, teaching them to confront the unpleasant, and offering skills for coping all help children develop integrity. No amount of teaching is as important as our example. We must be honest with our children and ourselves if we expect them to be honest with us.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① When has a child's lie helped you to recognize a real or imagined problem for your child? (For instance, he lies and says he is too sick to go to school when in reality he is being bullied there.)
- ② Share about a time when you had to talk with your child about lying. What worked and what didn't?
- ③ What lessons did you learn as a child about lying and telling the truth? Who was the most effective teacher in this area? How so?

## Closing Prayer

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*Pray the following words aloud together:*

Lord, we thank you for this conversation  
which has sparked new thoughts, questions,  
and insights.

Help us to be more intentional  
about how we talk to our children.

Guide us to be good examples for them  
about how to live lives of honesty and integrity.

We pray this in your name.

Amen.

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