Do Not Be Afraid: Helping Your Family Move from Fear to Courage

Fall brings the beginning of a new school year, and with new beginnings come new fears – for parents and children. Yet, God never calls us to something we can't handle. The phrase "Do not be afraid" appears in the Bible dozens of times – perhaps the most of any of God's admonitions in Scripture. How can we follow God's word to be not afraid, and how can we help our children be confident in God's plans for them?

CALL ON GOD, AND TRUST THAT GOD IS WITH YOU. In the Book of Jeremiah we read: "When you call me, when you go to pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart" (29:12-13). A good portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (see Mt 5:1–7:29) is devoted to trusting that God is good and that we have no need to worry. Near the end, Jesus asks: "Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asks for a fish? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him" (7:9-11).

USE EFFECTIVE, GOD-GIVEN COPING TECHNIQUES. Science tells us that when we are fearful our bodies often go into an instinctual "fight or flight" response. In other words, our brain, believing we truly are in danger, sends a rush of adrenaline that mobilizes our whole body for escape or conflict. When this happens, we often don't do our best thinking. But we can reverse this process by taking deep breaths, relaxing our muscles, and using logical thoughts to help combat our fearful ones.

Sometimes we fear failure or new experiences with only a very fuzzy idea of what can happen. It may be helpful for us (or our children) to pause and consider, “What’s the worst that could really happen?” Or, if we are anxious because we are considering the worst-case scenario, we might ask ourselves, “Is that likely to happen?” For example, a common fear of school-age children is that their parents will die. In my own counseling practice, when kids verbalize this fear, I sometimes ask, “Has that happened to a lot of your friends?” The answer, inevitably, is “no.” I then follow this up by saying: “It sounds like parents don’t usually die when their children are your age. Maybe you don’t need to be so worried about that.”

SET A GOOD EXAMPLE. One of the leading causes of child anxiety is anxiety in parents. Let your child see you facing new situations with confidence, and he or she will feel more confident and capable as well.

GO FORWARD IN COURAGE. If God tells us so many times not to be afraid, He does not want us to let fear decide things for us. Research in psychology tells us that anxiety is strengthened when we let ourselves, or our children, escape situations out of fear; but fear dissipates considerably when we face the feared situation head-on, and see that it is not as bad as we might have imagined. When your children are fearful, rather than giving a lot of extra help (which may inadvertently send the signal that they can’t handle something), give confident reassurance that you know they are capable and an extra little nudge if necessary to do what you are confident they can do.