

Dr. Brad Sachs, Ph.D
“Acceptance and Compassion In the Imperfect Family.”
NAMI Education Meeting
October 4, 2007

Dr. Sachs is a psychologist specializing in clinical work with children, adolescents, couples, and families in Columbia, Maryland. He is the founder and Director of The Father Center, a program designed to meet the needs of new, expectant, and experienced fathers.

Dr. Sach’s books include the following: “When No One Understands: Letters to a Teenager On Life, Loss, And the Hard Road to Adulthood”, “The Good Enough Child: How to Have An Imperfect Family and be Perfectly Satisfied.”

Dr. Brad Sachs spoke about how to deal with imperfection in the family with as much compassion and grace as possible.

Children are unpredictable. Parenthood can bring all of us to our knees. We all have a fantasy that we will create the child we deserve. Children are here to follow their own path-- not that of the parent.

Parenthood can at times be dark and intense. It is scary. It is important to realize that our children need us the most when they are at their least pleasant to be around.

We have to read our child’s temperament. The smart parent will adapt to their child’s nature.

Children need to see parents as having an identity other than that of being a parent. We don’t want to create a sense that our entire universe revolves around our children.

It is imperative that we convey to our children “that it is not what you have or what you do but who you are and how you love that matters.”

Dr. Sachs said that every child has three births that are as follows:

- 1. fantasy child- child of our dreams who compensates for our weaknesses.**
- 2. actual child – this child comes to us through birth or adoption. This child will disappoint you many times.**

- 3. good enough child – accepting your child for who they are rather than what we want them to be!**

Dr. Sachs noted that when children experience a biologically based flaw or vulnerability, we grieve. We need to mourn what we have lost because it gives us the motivation and freedom to heal and evolve. The 5 steps to grieving are: uncovering, acknowledging, understanding, forgiving, and changing.

Dr. Sachs noted that the goal of children and their parents is healthy separation. The goal is for the grown child to “walk away from home.” Unless we’re promoting autonomy, children won’t have the courage to move ahead with their lives.

It is important to remember that children are natural problem solvers. Problematic behaviors of a child are often their way of finding a solution to what is troubling them. Types of problems children face are: a physiological based problem, socially based problem, emotionally based problem, identity based problem, family based problem, or a separation based problem.

Dr. Sachs gave an example to the audience of how a child’s disruptive behavior in the classroom was an attempt to solve the problems he was having at home. A teacher in a special education class would give a warning to her class when they became disruptive. She would say “if you don’t quiet down, we won’t have recess.” This method worked for every child except one. This one child would become more disruptive and agitated when the teacher would say that. It turns out that this boy came from an abusive home. This child would defend his Mother from his father. The boy took the teacher’s comments as threatening and reacted in a way he thought was protective.

Dr. Sachs also mentioned that suicide can be seen as solving the problem of someone’s unbearable anger.

It is essential that a parent read between the lines with what their child is struggling with.

A question was asked of Dr. Sachs of how a child might use problematic behavior to solve problems. This child was 13, in middle school, well adjusted with lots of friends, cheerful, and bright. This child, however, did not complete assignments and the parent was getting calls from the teacher about that issue. Dr. Sachs suggested that the parents talk to the child mentioning that he/she is bright yet does not seem to complete homework assignments. The parent

should start a dialogue with the child by saying things like “it must be enough for you to make it through the day” or “perhaps you are afraid of being seen as nerdy if you do all your homework”. By establishing communication, the child would learn how to constructively solve her problem.

Dr. Sachs mentioned the importance of forgiving our children for being who they are. Forgiveness releases the child from the expectation that they will make all their parents’ dreams come true.

If we don’t learn to forgive, we will be resentful. That is an enduring feeling of anger and ill will that lasts long after a hurtful reality has past. Resentment is to be avoided because it keeps us imprisoned with our anger.

A question was asked about a family member who has a 34 year old son with schizophrenia. The family member wondered to what extent the man had forgiven himself for having that disease. Dr. Sachs responded by stating that anyone who has been betrayed by their body must find a way to forgive some force for carrying this burden. Forgiveness would give that consumer with schizophrenia a richness in their live and a certain flexibility. It can be healing.

Unfortunately, we live in a culture that emphasizes what you are not. It is important to counter those negative images.

True change only occurs in a loving family relationship. Children won’t change unless the parents or family change first. Change is always difficult and always presents risks. Faith in a child is important. We must believe that children are capable of growing and changing.

Nothing important can be taught. We should focus more on modeling positive behavior. “Life is a great teacher.” Dr. Sachs said “we want to be humble but not competitive about being humble.”

In summary, Dr. Sachs said that “parents can build loving, supporting, and realistic relationships with their children, and that those flawed and loveable children will grow to their full potential.”

Notes Taken by Rochelle Banta
October 8, 2007