



Parent Pages



RESOURCES FOR CHRISTIAN PARENTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Life Together: Distorted Reality?

A distortion is the alteration of an original shape. A cognitive distortion happens when our minds cause a false interpretation of events or a misunderstanding of a particular situation. Children often have such distortions as they are learning how to make sense of the world. As children talk and interact with others, they adjust these distortions for a better understanding. For example, the first time a friend does not want to play can be devastating, but playing with others can help create a better perspective that a friend is still a friend even if he is playing with someone else today.

A cognitive distortion becomes a problem when it is left unresolved. This is especially true when we ruminate — or relentlessly think over — an idea. Soon,

a misunderstanding becomes a wrong way of thinking that can lead to more misunderstandings, poor decision-making or even depression. It is helpful to listen for phrases that indicate thinking gone awry. Once identified, parents can help to redirect these interpretations.

“The party was no fun. One of the kids said my present was dumb.”

This is an example of filtering. Filtering happens when children allow one bad thing to overshadow many good things. It can easily happen at the end of a school day when your child is tired and more apt to remember the one frustrating event over the many good things that happened. This kind of thinking becomes a problem if



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it happens most of the time and your child begins to see the world as a negative place. Respond by acknowledging the negative and moving on to ask about the positive.

“I failed my spelling test. I will never learn to spell.”

Children are especially susceptible to polarized thinking, or the assumption that something is either all good or all bad. They are good at categorizing and lack the experience of seeing a variety of behaviors. Polarized thinking can lead to overgeneralization, where one bad incident can become a prediction for future events. Help your child focus on making the situation better. Children need to understand that people and events can change, and they need to see how personal behavior can bring about change.

“Sally didn’t play with me at recess. She hates me and will never play with me again.”

Jumping to conclusions happens when a child thinks she knows what someone is feeling. This kind of thinking also tries to predict what will happen. Children are learning to read social cues, so it is easy to fall into this kind of distortion. Show your child how to consider more than one possible interpretation. Teach her how to look for evidence of her interpretations. Turn the situation around, and ask your child to imagine herself in the other person’s place. This kind of perspective-taking will help your child to consider other explanations for the situation.

“I can’t help it if I got into trouble. Billy made me mad.”

It is important to encourage children to be accountable for their behavior. Remind your child that no one can make someone feel a particular way and that we each have choices about our behavior. Control fallacies, such as this example, can lead to delinquent behavior as a child learns to blame others as an excuse for wrongdoing. Children need to learn that while sin is inevitable, we always have

choices for behavior. A child who understands about repentance and forgiveness will learn to admit to sin, receive forgiveness and learn from mistakes.

“I feel scared. I don’t want to go to school because something bad will happen.”

This statement is an example of emotional reasoning, or believing that what we feel must be true. Our emotions are powerful things, and they work to help us make decisions and keep us safe. However, we cannot let our children think that feelings are the only thing we should consider when evaluating a situation. Talk with your child about his feelings and look for specific causes. In this case, the child needs to determine what is making him feel scared and how he can cope with that feeling.

“What if I trip when I walk on stage? Everyone will laugh, and the play will be ruined.”

A bit of “what if” thinking can be good, as it helps a child prepare for different situations. However, when a “what if” predicts a disaster, it has turned into catastrophizing. In this kind of thinking, a parent needs to guide a child toward a more reasonable perspective. Ask your child to identify what is the worst thing that can happen, and then make a plan to cope with that. For this example, it would be awful if an actor tripped on stage. It is likely that people would laugh, but the play would continue and the incident would be survivable.

When children display these kinds of thinking, God provides answers in His Word. Turn to the Bible to seek comfort for the worried, accountability for those who need it and reassurance that each child of God is loved — no matter what.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Read more about cognitive distortions: psychcentral.com/lib/15-common-cognitive-distortions/0002153.

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