

Expect Less, Get More: A Tale of Unrealistic Expectations

The table was beautifully decorated with an array of colorful foods. The sunlight shone in through the big, bay window overlooking the meal. The atmosphere was just right for conversation, fun and fellowship. There we sat, three married couples ready to enjoy the delightful brunch spread prepared. We were the only parents at the table with teenaged children. The other two couples had toddlers. The conversation quickly turned to parenting and expectations.

In that moment, we realized that living through this phase with our children gave us a lot to say on the subject. We did not want the wonderful atmosphere to turn into a parental counseling session by offering a bunch of unsolicited advice, but if we were asked, here's what we would have said:

“Expectations are a powerful thing in any relationship. And nothing is more hurtful than unrealized expectations. But there is nothing more dangerous than unvoiced unrealistic expectations.”

As we think back over our journey together, we realize that we argued a lot more when our kids were young. And many of the arguments stemmed from unrealistic expectations. We're not sure why we were so unrealistic. It could have been the lack of sleep or the lofty dreams we had for our children. Or perhaps the pressure we faced from extended family. We haven't quite been able to put our finger on it. But for some reason we had a lot of unrealistic expectations during that period of our marriage.

Time, experience and many deep conversations have helped to temper our expectations so that we don't have nearly the same struggles with unrealistic expectations as we did in our early years. Here's what we learned:

Lesson #1. Remember who you married

One of the biggest issues in committed relationships is this idea that my spouse will change once he/she marries me. This is the most unrealistic expectation that there is! Don't get us wrong; we believe that people can change. But meaningful change can only come through the power of God. We should remember that "...God...placed the parts in the body...just as he wanted them to be" (1 Corinthians 12:18, NIV). In other words, God purposely created our spouses to have the personality and attributes that he or she possesses. Yes, God made him and her that way on purpose!

For this reason, it is vitally important to have realistic expectations about what kinds of changes are possible for your spouse. It is unrealistic for you to expect your spouse to alter things about his or her natural personality. If your husband is an outgoing and extroverted person, that will remain true about him for as long as he's alive. He will sometimes be able to adjust his behavior to allow an introvert to be more comfortable. For example, he may agree to stay home for a quiet evening. But this does not mean that he will one day wake up and become an introvert. That's an unrealistic expectation. Your wife, who is type-A and likes to get things done may make an accommodation for her laidback husband by letting him plan the date night

without her involvement. But that does not mean that she will all of a sudden become a passive personality one day. As long as she's breathing, she'll want to know the details.

Remembering who you married requires you to recognize and appreciate your spouse and all that God purposely created them to be without trying to change them into someone else.

Lesson #2: Your child is not your clone.

Remember that even though your kids are here because of something you did, they're ultimately here because of God's power. He created them with precision and care. Your children are "...fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). In fact, He has a purpose for them in this world that you need to recognize (Jeremiah 1:5). So, temper your expectations of your children. Allow them to be who Christ created them to be. They belong to God and with your guidance will become what God has in mind for them.

This means you will need to get active in helping them to discover their purpose in life. At the brunch, one of our musician friends commented that he has no expectations at all about his son's ability to be musical when he gets older. He remarked that his son has already shown many signs of musicianship, but he won't be disappointed in the least if his boy does not end up playing a particular instrument or becoming a famous musician. We affirmed his stance and frame of mind because we believe he is right on track with his responsibility to his son as a parent.

Our job is to help our children achieve God's will in their lives, not to place unrealistic expectations on them for their life and career.

Lesson #3: Ignore extended family

Well, not literally, but almost! Extended family can often be unreasonable as they comment from a distance. Grandparents, for instance, lose their objectivity from the moment their grandkids are born. We are not certain why this is true, but how else can you explain why your mother pleads with you not to punish your child when she readily punished you throughout your teenaged years! Whatever the reason for this phenomenon, you should listen to your extended family differently when it comes to your children.

Sometimes extended family can unwittingly place unnecessary pressure on you in how you should rear your kids. They can be demanding about what extra curricular activities they need to be involved in, what summer camp they have to attend, which instrument they should play and what college they "must" enroll in. Since extended family members, in the traditional sense, do not have the primary responsibility of child rearing they often have an unrealistic perspective about how they should be reared.

Be careful not to be pressured by the expectations

placed on your nuclear family by loved ones.

Expectations hold a lot of weight and can cause negative responses if not properly understood. If you learn to manage your expectations with your spouse, your child and your extended family, you will have one less thing to stress about as you establish your home.