



## Understanding Circumstances and Children

There are times when things are going well, we feel happy and energetic, and we gladly do the things we need to do. There are also times when we feel the weight of the world on our shoulders; we may feel tired, lonely, and unhappy. At such times it is hard to get anything done or get along with others. This is true for children as well as for adults. As parents, we may expect children to be cheerful and obedient under all circumstances. If we want to be helpful to children, we should try to be aware of what is happening in their lives. Knowing their circumstances may or may not change the expectation, but it can make sure that we are being appropriately sensitive and helpful with them. For example, when a child has had a bad day at school, we may make extra efforts to be supportive. We may hold the child or take a walk or read a story. If we have paid attention to the preferences of each child, we probably know what will be helpful for that child under those circumstances.

It is not easy to be in touch with what is happening with each child. But there are ways that help. We can notice the things they do. We can listen carefully when they tell about their days. We can notice their moods. **Over time we can develop a sense of what is normal for each of our children.** What is most important to that child? What is most painful? How can I soothe or comfort that child? How can I most effectively show support and love?

When a child is in a bad mood, it usually does not help to ask "What is wrong?" Most children will respond, "Nothing." But it can be helpful to respond to the message that their body has already given us: "It looks like you had a bad day." At that point the child feels invited but not pressured to share about his or her day. As long as the child shows signs of unhappiness, we can listen and respond without sermons. We can say supportive things like, "That is so hard."

Do we still expect children to follow the rules when they have had a bad day? Generally, yes. However, **we can make some adjustments to accommodate their challenges.** A child might still be expected to clean his room before dinner but some quiet time might be provided before the cleaning begins. Or we can help the child with the cleaning, making it a team effort.

**Often we do not notice the ways that stress in our lives effects the children in our families.** When we are stressed, tired, or unhappy, we send signals to our children. They are very sensitive to the moods of people around them. When we have difficulties, they may feel less safe and less loved. As a result they may be distant and anxious or they may cling to us. That is why it is important to notice our moods and their effect on our children. We can reassure them, "I'm having a hard time right now but I'll get through it. I'm glad you're my child and I'll always love you!"

When parents are sensitive to their children, it helps the children to feel safe. It also helps children develop into caring people.

## Applications:

Think about each of your children. What is most important and enjoyable for each child? What is most painful? How can I best soothe or comfort each child? How can I most effectively show support and love for each?

In the last few weeks, how are things going for each of your children? What stresses might each be feeling? What special joys has each had? What stresses are you experiencing? How are they affecting your children? Are there ways you can reassure them? When a child is feeling pain, understanding from you can be especially healing.