

## Improve Your relationship with Your Parenting Partner Podcast - Part 2

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0:07 ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Hello. I'm Annmarie McMahon with the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University, and this is the ParentingMontana.org Podcast.

This is the second podcast of two where we're talking about intentional ways to grow a healthy relationship with your parenting partner. If you haven't already listened to Part 1 yet, that's OK. You might want to listen to it next.

As parents, we want to be at our best for our children. I've learned that if I want to be at my best, I need to take care of my own health and wellbeing and that includes learning ways to improve my relationship with my parenting partner.

Many of us experience changes in our relationship when we become parents, a child can bring about positive changes, there might be a new and different level of connection. A child can bring about strains too, less sleep, less time to talk, less time to spend together.

We might find ourselves disagreeing more, we might not have the energy to sort out the differences as they arise. Intentionally growing a healthy relationship with your parenting partner means that we are nurturing and strengthening our relationship, often by figuring out ways to communicate in a way that deepens our intimacy.

I'd like to re-introduce our guests for the podcast, Tom and Mary Frances Burke who have been married for 42 years, Steve and Debbie Robbins who have been married 37 years, and Father Tom Ogg, who has been a priest for 54 years.

Together they have over 100 years of working together with couples to help them listen and share and connect more deeply in their relationships.

In Part 1, we learned about how trust and being able to communicate about our feelings creates a foundation for strong relationships between parenting partners.

We heard a definition of feelings...

FR. TOM OGG:

What is a feeling? And the understanding or the definition, if you will, that I like is an inner, spontaneous reaction to something outside, to another person, another situation, to an event, something outside ourselves, but it's an inner, spontaneous reaction. And if I have that that frees me up for lots of things so that I can talk about it, I can fuss about it, I can do whatever, and not be hurting anybody. It's me, my insides.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

And how this definition really can change how we approach communicating about our feelings...

MARY FRANCES BURKE:

I think when we accept the basic tenet that feelings just happen. We don't choose to feel angry, we don't choose to feel happy, we just are. We have a good friend who says, "Feelings are like a sneeze," it just happens. And I think when we accept that basic tenet, we can let down our defenses and talk in a more civil, polite, understanding way about the situation, we're much less likely to be defensive and angry, "Well, you shouldn't feel that way," or, "I didn't make you feel that way," or, "That's not my problem, that's your problem, fix it."

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So I think the ability to identify and name your feelings is so foundational, but for you to listen to each other is another skill that can be practiced and grown. So, let's start Part 2 on the skill of listening. How do we become better at listening?

DEBBIE ROBBINS:

I am a terrible listener, but I have forced myself to start to learn. And I think when Steve is communicating at a deeper level, when he is talking about his feelings, it is really my responsibility to listen deeply and understand and ask questions. "Well, when else have you felt like that? What color is that? What smell is that? What other vision does it bring, if this feeling were on the street, what would it be doing?" And trying to just put myself totally 100% focused on him at the moment really has helped me to learn to listen and to let go of everything that's going on in my head.

And I used to be one of those people who I was, I was listening in order to respond to you because I wanted to make sure I got my 25,000 words a day in or whatever it is, Steve would tell it's more than that. And so my listening patterns, I had a lot of barriers to listening and I had to learn what those barriers were and truly focus on him. So I look at him, we face each other, we remove distractions, that helps me learn to listen better to him.

TOM BURKE:

I think for me, when I hear the words I feel, that really perks my ears up because I know this is important information. And so being able to clue in, I really want to know what it's like to be Mary Frances. I want to know what it's like for her experience to be in relationship with me. And so in order to get there, I really have to listen. And listening is an act of love. I think Debbie touched on this earlier of choosing to love or decision to love, listening is very much that. Mary Frances mentioned I like to talk.

And so for me, the first thing I have to do is shut off the mouth and let the ears work. And so that's a step one, but it goes much deeper than that. It's really wanting to know what is the experience of the other person. And that's where the act of listening or listening with your heart comes in and that kind of listening, and then perhaps giving some feedback is a way of letting the person know, "Oh, he gets me." And what a gift to be understood on that level. That's what active listening really does.

MARY FRANCES BURKE:

I think active listening also involves asking questions of the other to learn more and to draw that other person out. And that's really crucial with me because I can be very concise and a woman of few words and Tom really needs to oftentimes draw out more information. I listen and I talk all day at work and when I come home, I'm sick and tired of listening and talking all day, I just want to absorb and soak into peace and quiet.

STEVE ROBBINS:

And I think listening can be a behavior to change. I know as a guy, I like to fix things. And when Deb would come home and say something, I was immediately trying to fix whatever the situation may be instead of active listening to what her feelings were and what was going on inside of her. So by changing my behavior and truly listening has been very beneficial in just expanding our relationship and understanding each other.

FR. TOM OGG:

Well, there's so many different aspects to listening. We can listen and one of my bad habits was I would listen until I really thought I understood. And then I would want to do, like Steve said, fix it or to respond. I have my answer ready to go. As soon as they stopped talking, which is not very helpful because that means I stopped listening somewhere in the process because I had what I thought I needed and I wasn't tuned into the other person. And oftentimes my experience now is that the better I listen, the less I have to say, because a person will, at some point, they want to be heard, understood, appreciated, loved, whatever it is, but they have needs too, and they're trying to communicate those needs to us. And spouses do that just as much as anybody else in relationship, whether it's in the workplace or in the home, it's again, pretty basic that it's kind of nice to be known and appreciated or understood.

MARY FRANCES BURKE:

I want to key off of something that father Tom said, to listen, to fix someone else. And I think there we've all been in that situation before where we're just, "All I want to do is share my frustration of something that happened at work today and I don't need you to tell me in 15 different ways how I could have done it differently and try and fix it so it happens differently the next time around." That's almost an erroneous way of listening. We don't want to listen to fix someone. You listen to understand, to get to know them better and more deeply, and to love them. If you have a suggestion, say, "Could I offer a

suggestion?" And ask permission. Don't just assume that because they're telling you something and you've got the perfect right answer, that that's what they want to hear. Because nine times out of 10, they're just want to vent and they need a shoulder, they don't need to be fixed.

TOM BURKE:

I think the other thing I was going to say on that is when we're listening with our heart, we don't judge the other person. And so sometimes we might ask a question, "Well, why do you feel that way?" And it's the innocent mistake, but I'll tell you right now, it's a big mistake because the why question implies that you're broken, this is screwed up, you blew it, "Why did you do that?" And what really would be a more constructive question would be, "Tell me more about that. I don't know how that ended up ending that way." And if you can get the judgment out and just say, "I really want to understand this feeling. I really want to get to the heart of this feeling and it's not right or wrong, and I'm not blaming you. I'm not blaming me. I'm just trying to listen to understand, listen, to get to know you better." That is the real key to active listening.

MARY FRANCES BURKE:

And I think sometimes something as simple as saying, "I can really, I sense your hurt. I can feel it just in looking at the expression." That affirms that feeling in your spouse. And that's just so gratifying rather than saying, "Here, let me fix you."

DEBBIE ROBBINS:

And I think I learned very early in my work career and it helped me learn this in our partnering relationship, particularly when you're dealing with parenting issues, is if a person keeps repeating themselves over and over again, it's because they don't feel listened to. And so asking those questions, "Well, how does this feel? Tell me more, help me understand this better." Those kinds of responses in your communication can really help dig to the core, but it also lets the person know, "I'm listening. I want to hear you. I want to understand what it's like to be feeling what you're feeling at this moment." And when you use that active listening technique and you truly are listening, that person feels it and they'll stop repeating themselves over and over and over again because now they feel listened to,

FR. TOM OGG:

With all this discussion about listening. One of the things that I think is very important is nonverbal communication, which is a different form of listening. We're not listening with our heart to grasp or appreciate the intention or the desire of the other, but with the eyes we listen with our eyes too, meaning, look at the expression on a person's face, it says something. And I've been told that non-verbal does not lie. It may be misunderstood or misinterpreted, but they're very powerful. And whether a person's sitting there with a clenched fist under the table, that's saying something pretty clearly, that rolling eyeball, that's another example of... I'd enjoy, especially watching couples when they wink at

each other, they're connecting, they got the message, they're relating very well in that capacity and not saying a word. I also have been in situations where, where people don't have to communicate in words to really communicate.

I remember an example some years ago with this elderly couple, I really admired. And we were sitting there visiting and she got up and went over to the bookshelf and picked out a book and brought it back and handed it to him. And I noticed this and I said, afterwards, I said, "What happened with that? Well, she knew I wanted it." They had that depth of relationship that was so powerful and it was just one example of this couple that I knew, that were just amazing, their ability to connect to be intimate in a very nonverbal and even non-physical way, but it was deep and powerful. So I'm just wanting to push that button a bit by saying non-verbal communication is very important. That look on a face when a person isn't aware that you're looking at them, you can see things and hopefully try to use that helpfully.

DEBBIE ROBBINS:

Can I just add to that? Sometimes when we're talking about feelings, you had mentioned, Father Tom, that sometimes it can be misunderstood or misinterpreted. And so if Steve sits back and crosses his arms when we're talking, I might stop myself and ask him, "Your body posture just changed, are you disinterested? Are you feeling something different?" Instead of assuming that he's not interested or mad anymore, based on the body posture, I choose to ask, to clarify, so that I don't misinterpret that.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So asking for clarification seems very important – especially if I might draw conclusions about my partner based on something they are doing. This brings up another concern I have: What if my partner shares a feeling that surprises me – something I was expecting?

FR. TOM OGG:

Well, there's lots of ways to respond, but I'm thinking there's, again, patterns. An example of that would be, "Why are you feeling that way? Where'd that feeling come from?" That kind of thing. It's in effect rejecting the feeling that's offered. And another one might be toleration, you tolerate the feeling, "Oh, I'm sorry. You feel that way. That's too bad. Tough." There's different ways of toleration like that too, but the obvious gift of sharing feelings is accepting the feeling and the person who's feeling that way. Acceptance. And there's an example that can help with that, I think at least it helped me when I first heard it. And that was that someone gives me a sweater for a gift. Rejection is, "I don't like a color. Why are you giving me a sweater?" Toleration is, "Oh, this is nice. Thanks a lot. I really like it," but you never wear it. That's a pretty good clue of something else that's tolerating or avoiding it.

The acceptance is you get the sweater, you look at it and say, "Oh, this, this is great." And you enjoy it, you acknowledge the giver as well as the sweater and you wear it. So

you're accepting the person with the feeling or with the gift that we receive. And feelings are, again, because it's part of who I am really on the inside, it's a gift. It's a gift to hear how another's feeling. And again, remember it doesn't matter if it's positive or negative. It's a matter of saying, "I'm hearing you. I get you. I appreciate you being honest with me. You being forthright, you being real, just telling the truth." If you're having a crappy day, you acknowledge that. If you're having a good day, that's even better, but we don't rely on the quality of the gift, the quality of the feeling, because remember they're neutral.

DEBBIE ROBBINS:

So to continue with the analogy that it is a gift, sharing feelings is a gift. How do you respond when somebody shares something that surprises you or catches you off guard, or you don't know what to say? Just like you would a gift. "Thank you." You said thank you for sharing. You don't have to say anything more than just thank you.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Let's spend a few minutes talking about how our relationship impacts our family. So folks are listening to the ParentingMontana.org Podcast. I'd like to hear some of your thoughts on the impacts that your relationship has on your parenting partner on your family.

TOM BURKE:

I think there's a number of things. One is that if we are together on a subject and we understand each other and we are there to kind of validate each other, children will often try to triangulate and will maybe pit mom against dad, or sometimes they'll just push our buttons just to see how pushing this button works, that's one of the things kids do. And so recognizing that maybe one of us is getting stressed by a situation that a child is doing, we might be fresher. The other person might be able to jump in and kind of redirect the situation. So when you're tuned into how your partner is handling a situation, you might be able to redirect it. You might be able to calm a situation down, you might be able to help make it more constructive. And again, that just comes from knowing the other person. And especially if you know that this is something that's a hot button for them.

MARY FRANCES BURKE:

It's like kind of stepping in and rescuing. That's the way I see it. And I it's appreciated

TOM BURKE:

It's teamwork.

MARY FRANCES BURKE:

It is. Teamwork is a very good way to describe it.

STEVE ROBBINS:

And I think for us, setting that example early on of open communication helped our children through the school years, especially teenage years, where they could understand what they were feeling and be able to express it in a positive manner, especially in today's world where most of communication is done via texting, iPhone, nonverbal that you can't even see. Being able to express and understand what's going on inside of each of us as an individual, I think is a huge benefit in understanding who we are and being able to get along with others.

TOM BURKE:

I think there's a part of this thing with listening and sharing of feelings, that there becomes a responsibility that one has in looking at my own part in the situation. And I think that, for example, if I am willing to take responsibility for say something that wasn't well planned or wasn't well executed, backfired. If I could say, "Boy, I would like to do that over again," I think what that does is it lets them know, "Hey we're all able to make mistakes." I think if kids can see that, for example, if we set up a play date and we're kind of excited about it, but it just doesn't go well, we could talk to the kids about that and say, "I should have listened a little bit more, maybe I could have planned this better." When they see us taking responsibility, it allows them to learn that also.

And also, getting back to what Debbie said earlier about this opportunity to ask for forgiveness, I think that really works well with parenting children too. There are times we just have to ask them for forgiveness for having made a mistake. Sometimes we push them when they were tired or we put them into a situation where they felt insecure and we didn't quite understand what they needed for us as an adult to be there for them. And if we can recognize that or if we can't say it to the children, at least if we can say it to our partner, "I think I blew that. I think I push the kids a little too hard," or something to that effect, then they recognize that we're trying to learn, we're trying to grow and that we're willing to take responsibility.

And I know this sounds like we're just beating this drum to death, but ordinarily the way we get to that insight is through our feelings. So if I'm feeling embarrassed, instead of being angry about that, if I can tease that out a little bit and say, "Where's this coming from?" And then I realized, "Well, I made a mistake. That's why I'm embarrassed." Embarrassment's okay, that's a normal feeling. The behavior was something I would like to have a do-over. And being able to admit that, to share that, take responsibility, it's huge as far as helping to shape how things go the next time.

DEBBIE ROBBINS:

I think there's some long term effects of our behaviors. I said earlier, we wanted to have a great home for our children to understand what unconditional love is and forgiveness and healing. And certainly it affected them growing up because when they were in their tumultuous teenage years, we could have some conversations about, "How are you feeling about what happened today?" And they could articulate it and that would help to

calm them down. But we noticed later when our daughter was in college and she was dating a gentleman and she came home one day and said, "He's not the one." And we're like, "How do you know that? Well, because I recognize the difference between lustfulness and love." And so she chose to break a relationship and then ultimately found her husband later on.

And so I think some of those things that she learned growing up and being able to identify who she was and what was important to her through her feelings, helped her make a really good spousal decision. But also, I think it's affected our extended family and how we treat and speak to our siblings, our parents, our children's friends when they were over. Some of them have come back to us and said, "Gosh, you guys really provide a good role model. It's not that we were intending to be good role models. And we made a lot of mistakes along the way. And like Tom said, you have those discussions to say, "Whoops, I guess I should have done this better." But when those kids see that growing up, whether they lived with us or didn't live with us, it seemed to have an impact on them taking responsibility for their own behaviors growing up. So I think when you start to build some of these skills, you don't have any idea how far it's going to impact people at work or your siblings, your extended family, but it does.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

What are some of the ways that community influences your relationships or maybe discuss the importance of community in your relationships?

TOM BURKE:

Well, we really like to tee off of other people. As creatures, we pay great attention. Little kids are famous for this, they walk like dad, they talk like dad, so they are just encrypting how it is to be a human being from our behaviors, sometimes to our embarrassment. But I would just say that as adults, we do the same thing. And we really need to seek out others who have similar goals, similar values, people who want to get better as parents, who want to get better as lovers, and their relationship. And so that's kind of the impetus for community, is to be able to surround ourselves with others so that this isn't so effortful, we can learn from others. And I think that's what inspired us. And it goes back to what I said earlier too, it really is a lot of fun when you find folks that are willing to be honest, to really share what it's like to be them. It allows you to let down your own defenses and to really explore what it's like to be you.

MARY FRANCES BURKE:

I love the saying that it takes a whole village to raise a child and that is so true. It's amazing what our children have learned from adults that we've hung out with. It's amazing when you see them make out their wedding invite list, that they've included people on that list that are friends of ours. Not because they're friends of ours, but because they have become friends and mentors of our children,

DEBBIE ROBBINS:



We've been involved with different small groups that meet regularly over time, a number of different groups through the years. Some we've learned through our church and gotten involved, others in other activities that we are involved with that we've kind of formed groups that maybe meet once a month to just talk about marriage and feelings and how you're doing. And I think without some of those people to support and help us, we could have been sidetracked very easily. And so finding, finding good role models for yourself and people that you want to emulate their behavior is really vital to being able to sustain this long term.

STEVE ROBBINS:

And I think over the years, it's amazing to me that all couples in relationships go through not only stages very similarly, but have such common conflicts or joys. Money, whether it's too much or not enough. So finances, children, in-laws, outlaws, family. We go through so many struggles and joys the same. We're not all that different. And just sharing those ideas with each other has been a blessing and an understanding of just, we're okay and we can learn from each other.

FR. TOM OGG:

I just want to repeat the question, the question itself speaks volumes, especially in these days when individualism and in our Western mentality of this rugged individualism is so apparent and so prevalent. I'm thinking, wait a minute, somehow I have the sense, not just from school and classes, that we're social creatures. We need each other. We're, we're part of a big picture here. And as we know, the world's getting pretty small. This little planet is pushing each other around a bit. So we have to be aware that we're in this together, it's not an individual alone. And I remember growing up as a little kid, how many times when I actually got on a horse and rode into the foothills behind the place and pondered about, "I'm so different from everybody." Well, that's how I felt then, even though I wasn't able to articulate it or even talk about it, but I've realized since then, that was so not right.

I enjoyed playing with the neighbor kids and fighting with my brothers and we need each other in every which way, in every which way. I would invite, come up with a way that we don't. We don't need some of the negativity that's in our world, but as far as people who can we afford not to relate to or enjoy and get to know better. I get excited about that piece, where I think so your word community, whatever you mean by that, I'm thinking whether it's the world, or a certain township or school setting. It's the sad moment, it's the person who's emotionally hurting, which means that's a feeling again, when they aren't connected or relating to someone else. And so the isolation, the bullying, the things that are so negative that can limit the necessity of recognizing how interdependent we really are.

TOM BURKE:

And I think there are times we think about, "What can I get out of this?" And I mentioned it's really nice to have a mentor, someone who can teach us, someone we can get some feedback from, maybe someone with a little more experience than we have. They've already been through the toddler stage and now we're in the toddler stage and boy, some words of wisdom would sure be helpful. But there's another part of this too, and this is a really important part of community, is that the gift that we bring. And oftentimes we may never know what it is that just our presence, our being there, and sometimes being there when we don't feel like being there. We may not see ourselves as the best parent or partner or lover, but the fact that we show up, as Debbie was talking about, it makes the group better if they can see us when we're real in all stages.

And I think there are times that we tend to idealize each other, or we tend to idealize their lives, or we might idealize our parents' lives and say, "Gee, I wish I could be like them, but I'm not." And the reality is we all have gifts to bring. We might not know what it is. Sometimes we do get some feedback later on. I used to tell a joke that the greatest sound on earth is the sound of someone else's kid crying out in church. And I made that comment a number of times, and I don't know, 10 years later a woman was telling someone else the same story, I heard it in a group, she was saying. And I think when I heard it, I laughed inside. I thought, "Well, that's wonderful. This is a piece of little piece of wisdom that..." Yeah, it is great when somebody else's kid is doing that. And it lets us all know that this is all normal, this is normal behavior.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So is there anything that I should have asked today that I just didn't know enough to ask?

TOM BURKE:

Well, I keep thinking about the person who's driving down the highway in Montana trying to absorb this and thinking, "How does this apply to me?" And I would just say, we are all part of a bigger community and the ways that we parent our children is incredibly important. And I would also say that parenting is perhaps the most difficult job we're going to ever have, and we're not going to get it 100% right, but it is also an opportunity to grow more deeply in love with our spouse. And if we can do this as a team, if we can be on the same page most of the time, if we can forgive each other, encourage each other, mentor each other, in the end I think the experience of raising those children is going to be incredibly invaluable to who we are as people and a couple.

DEBBIE ROBBINS:

I think a thought that I have that maybe could fit in somewhere is when we get into these relationships, into these parenting relationships, whether you're married or unmarried, or it doesn't really matter what the relationship structure is, you've committed to each other and you've committed to each other to help raise these other little ones somewhere along the way. And remembering that that commitment is going to have ups and downs and just keep trying, even when you're trying to have a conversation and it

just falls apart, just step away from it and take a breath and come back and try it again, because things often fail before we succeed. And we're going to have ups and downs and that's perfectly normal.

TOM BURKE:

I'd like to say something that I really admire in the situation of divorced couples who are co-parenting with say another couple and sharing children. And when I think that these couples can get on a really mature level of respect for each other, even though their original relationship didn't survive, to be able to present the other adults in a way that shows respect to the children is such a gift, and not to be in this situation of being pulled apart by the ongoing pain maybe of that broken relationship. And I've seen some couples do this really successfully. And again, I come back to feelings, that I think if they really understand their feelings in that situation, they can own their part of it. And then if they can somehow uplift the other people who are helping to share the raising of these children, it can be so successful.

I'd just like to say thanks. Thanks for inviting us to do this and thank you for shedding such an important light on this for your listeners. And we want to wish them the best and recognize that if the first attempt doesn't work, that you keep trying at it because this is really worth becoming skillful at.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So I've heard today that being at my best for my children includes learning ways to improve my relationship with my parenting partner. The addition of a child into a family is a time of hope and anticipation, but a secret to successfully managing that transition is to keep our relationship strong. Intentionally growing a healthy relationship with your parenting partner means making a daily decision to nurture and strengthen your relationship often by communicating in a way that deepens your intimacy.

If you enjoyed this podcast, make sure you've listened to Part 1 of Improve Your Relationship With Your Parenting Partner where we talk about the foundation of a relationship, getting better at communicating about our feelings and engaging with our partner.

Information on intentional communication can be found under the communication tab in the, I Want to Know More, section of ParentingMontana.org. In addition, check out the feelings chart, a way to teach feeling words, to help in emotional growth in that same section. You can also find an easy to use rack card on intentional communication in the website's media section. So thank you for joining us today. Keep checking back for additional podcasts, tools and resources being added to ParentingMontana.org.

39:12 VOICEOVER

The ParentingMontana.org podcast is produced by the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University in collaboration with the Montana Department of

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Thanks for listening to the ParentingMontana.org podcast.

40:08 END