

Identity Formation: What Every Child Needs

(Part 1)

Introduction

Your identity is primarily formed in your formative years and parents play a crucial role in this. Identity formation is also known as individuation, which is the development of the distinct personality of an individual. You identify your uniqueness apart from others. A study found that for boys and girls, identity formation is positively influenced by parental involvement specifically in the areas of: support, social monitoring and school monitoring.[Sartor, Carolyn E. & Youniss, James. (2002). *The relationship between positive parental involvement and identity achievement during adolescence. Adolescence, 37, 221-234.*] In contrast, when the relationship is not as close and the adolescent fears rejection from the parent, they are more likely to feel less confident in forming a separate identity from their parent(s).

A central part of your identity is what is known as Personal Continuity. This is the process of ensuring that your self-awareness, sentience (capable of knowing things through your senses), sapience (Latin *Sapientia*: wisdom, thinking, intelligence, good taste), and the ability to perceive the relationship between oneself and one's environment, are consistent from one moment to the next. When people don't have this the result could be very concerning. The extreme of this could be Dissociative Identity Disorder, what was previously called multiple personality disorder. This is a disorder characterised by the presence of two or more distinct personality states. It is usually a reaction to trauma as a way to help a person avoid bad memories (e.g. Dissociative Amnesia). Dissociative identity disorder is characterised by the presence of two or more distinct personality identities (on average its actually 3 - 16 alters with different heart rates etc). Each may have a unique name, personal history and characteristics. I am highlighting these things because we are underdiagnosed in this country and our mental health is crucial to our functioning as human beings.

I believe that our families are the crucible for unlocking greatness. I was fascinated the other day when I asked my boys who they thought was man of the match after our home showdown football game. It showed me that their self-confidence was very high when they each said they thought they were the man of the match. Maybe these were delusions of grandeur. To be honest with you I thought I was the man of the match too.

As we explore what every child needs, you can focus on your role as a parent and you can also examine your own upbringing to see where the gaps, cracks a leakages in your life might be. Engage with your family and assess yourselves to ultimately find healing and restoration. God has a solution for our brokenness. Family was His idea. He wouldn't have created it if it was bad for us.

Ps 68:6

God sets the lonely in families,^[a] he leads out the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.

Eph 3:14-15

¹⁴ *For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,* ¹⁵ *from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name...*

Ps 127:3-5

³ Behold, children are a gift of the LORD, The fruit of the womb is a reward. ⁴ Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, So are the children of one's youth. ⁵ How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them; They will not be ashamed when they speak with their enemies in the gate.

Ask yourself, "why did God place these children under my care?" God has given you all the resources you need in order to be a faithful steward over them.

In this section of the Identity Rehab we will outline the key things that every child needs. These are the factors that make a family functional. As I go through these with you I am hoping you will begin to problematise things that had not been an issue for you. Things that I thought were normal growing up were only problematised when a friend visited me.

1. Maintenance

Basic maintenance consists of food, shelter and health care. In some families, if the parent isn't physically well, this can become the focus of their life and the child's health becomes less of a priority. By placing too much focus on their own needs, the sick child may become critically ill.

Ps 37:25

I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.

1 Tim 5:8

Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Children have God-given rights. A right to food and shelter, education, protection from abuse, moral innocence etc

Who is under your care? Are you looking after them? The focus here is on needs not wants.

1 Tim 6:7-8

⁷ For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. ⁸ But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.

When you feed your children, does it have high nutritional value? You are a steward of your kitchen. It's not right that children insist on eating what they want, not brushing their teeth and you are now stuck with the dental bills and health issues. Part of maintenance is healthy nourishment. If you have children who are not staying with you, make sure you are still looking after them.

2. Nurture

Nurture results in the sense of emotional warmth and the feeling of being home. There are a lot of emotions associated with home. Think about your own feelings towards your home, these feelings will stem from your childhood.

To nurture is to care for and protect (someone or something) while they are growing.

Many of us are good at preparing to go to work, few of us are good at preparing to go home afterwards.

Nurturing is not something that only women do. I remember asking an old school friend some questions and he responded saying I was very nurturing. Essentially nurturing is about taking care of something or someone. Biblically this should be done with tenderness, which is gentleness and kindness. When we are talking about physical tenderness we are talking about sensitivity to pain. If I am tender towards my children and wife then it means I am sensitive to their pain and their needs. It means as a father when I put my kids to bed, I need to ask them, "Are you sure you are warm enough or can I get you another blanket?" "Jaedyn is your knee still sore?" When I am running with my wife and she has had an ache I ask, "My Love how are you feeling?" That's tenderness and it is central to nurture. Children need to FEEL loved. I ask people whether their parents loved them and sadly many know it in their heads but didn't feel it in their hearts.

Col 3:19

Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

Your wife is not your "homie." Nurture and tenderness begins in your marriage. Your children get their cues from your tone. What was the tone in your home growing up? Typically what happens is you have either followed suit or gone the other extreme where you are now afraid of conflict or any kind.

So your identity was influenced by the degree of nurture you experienced.

Right now, is home a safe space for you? Is home a spacious place of growth or do you feel squashed as an individual. Remember, the result of nurturing is growth. I don't like it when my kids sound afraid to ask me for something.

Ephesians 6:4 (KJV)

And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Nurture = Paideia = discipline, instruction, training, and rearing.

It is clear that this must be done in gentleness as the scripture states fathers should not provoke their children to anger.

Eph 4:32

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Compassionate = tender-hearted = gut-level sympathy and empathy.

3. Inclusion

Inclusion is a sense of belonging, knowing that you will be missed when you are not present. You feel needed. You are known by name and are unconditionally accepted. You don't have to pay your membership fees to be there. Many people grow up in families where they feel they have to perform to be accepted. For example, if they do not excel in their school-work, they do not feel as if they belong; or if they fail to score a try in their rugby game they think their father will be ashamed of them. It is essential to communicate to children that their efforts are recognised and that having fun is also important. By positively stroking children when they perform and ignoring them when they do not, performance mentality can be encouraged which leads to the feeling that "I am only accepted when I perform".

- Healthy families have a strong sense of inclusion and belonging.
- One of the main purposes of family is to have an environment where someone gains self-acceptance.
- People will always gravitate to where they are celebrated and not where they are tolerated.
- Is the world celebrating you whilst your family is not appreciating the greatness in you?
- In family we have a place where we are accepted for who we are.

Imagine what family life would be like if we practised the following scriptures:

Romans 12:15-18

¹⁵ *Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.* ¹⁶ *Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.* ¹⁷ *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.* ¹⁸ *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

Putting this into practice would result in a deep sense of belonging. Reflect on your upbringing. Did you feel like you belonged? If not, how has that impacted you? I have seen how this impacts some middle children. They continuously look over the wall feeling they have to strive for attention and progress. Is there favouritism in your household? Was there favouritism when you were growing up. I remember how I felt when I was asked to stay home one Christmas whilst the rest of the family travelled to our rural home.

Romans 15:7

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Accept = to welcome, to aggressively receive whilst taking personal interest in. (In a tense that intensifies the meaning).

4. Differentiation

Differentiation occurs when your uniqueness is celebrated. In many families the lines are blurred where the mother doesn't recognise where she ends and the father begins, or where she ends and the first born child begins. Because everyone is so entangled in each other's every move, family enmeshment occurs.

Each person should be recognised as an individual. I was doing a team intervention recently and one of the points raised was to do with maintaining individuality whilst being a team player. Not losing yourself. So often parents squash differentiation and as soon as the children move out of home they become an extreme version of the opposite.

Acknowledging your unique characteristics allows you to get to know your likes, dislikes, strengths and weaknesses. Parents should strive to provide guidance and never try to live their dreams through their children. In a functional family we must exercise boundaries and celebrate and respect appropriate privacy. Imposing different preferences on children can prevent them from making decisions on their own, or thinking for themselves. At a certain age your job is to help your children to

understand the consequences of their behaviour as opposed to deciding on their behalf.

Did you choose the career you felt God was leading you to?

Did you marry the person you wanted to marry?

A good parent knows the power they have to shape their kids but never abuses it.

I told my boys that they don't have to support the same football team as me. The result was that Daniel decided to support Tottenham and is very passionate about it. That's great.

Differentiation is not about moral boundaries but to do with preferences, taste and individual style.

Did you grow up in a home where you were mocked for your preferences and tastes? How did this impact you?

Do you know the uniqueness of your spouse and of your offspring and are you calling it out like Jacob did for his sons?

Genesis 49:19-27

¹⁹ *"Gad^[i] will be attacked by a band of raiders, but he will attack them at their heels. ²⁰ "Asher's food will be rich; he will provide delicacies fit for a king. ²¹ "Naphtali is a doe set free that bears beautiful fawns.^[j] ²² "Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall. ²³ With bitterness archers attacked him; they shot at him with hostility. ²⁴ But his bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed^[l] limber, because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, ²⁵ because of your father's God, who helps you, because of the Almighty,^[m] who blesses you with blessings of the skies above, blessings of the deep springs below, blessings of the breast and womb. ²⁶ Your father's blessings are greater than the blessings of the ancient mountains, than^[n] the bounty of the age-old hills. Let all these rest on the head of Joseph, on the brow of the prince among^[o] his brothers. ²⁷ "Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; in the morning he devours the prey, in the evening he divides the plunder."*

We will explore the remaining six next week. For now, let's go forth and assess ourselves on these ones:

- 1. Maintenance**
- 2. Nurture**
- 3. Inclusion**
- 4. Differentiation**