

Struggle is an Important Part of Growth

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A man spotted a chrysalis on a milkweed plant in his garden. After a few days, a small opening appeared. He sat and watched the butterfly for several hours as it struggled to force its body through that little hole. Then, it seemed to stop making any progress. The man decided to help the butterfly; he took a pair of scissors and snipped off the remaining bit of the chrysalis. The butterfly emerged easily. But it had a swollen body and small, shriveled wings.

The man continued to watch the butterfly because he expected that, at any moment, the wings would enlarge and expand to be able to support the body, which would contract in time. Neither happened! In fact, the butterfly spent the

rest of its short life crawling around with a swollen body and shriveled wings. It never was able to fly. What the man in his kindness and haste did not understand was that the restricting chrysalis and the struggle required for the butterfly to get through the tiny opening were God's way of forcing fluid from the body of the butterfly into its wings so that it would be ready for flight once it achieved its freedom from the chrysalis.

Sometimes struggles are exactly what we need in our life. If God allowed us to go through our life without any obstacles, it would cripple us. We would not be as strong as what we could have been. We might never fly. Just like the butterfly, our children need struggles and challenges to strengthen them. Without any obstacles, they won't discover their strengths and abilities and may even be lacking when facing new situations.

Even though we know the importance of allowing our children to work through challenges, this is one of the most difficult things to do—standing by as our child or even young adult struggles without stepping in to help. Without thinking about it, we spend a lot of energy every day controlling (or trying to control) our children—telling them what to eat, how quickly to get dressed, how to comb their hair, what friends they should have, how to chew their food, how to sit properly at the table, what they should do in their spare time, what they should study in school, what career they should have, how to raise their own children and so much more!

When we control our children's choices too much, we do prevent some of their mistakes, but the consequences are serious. By controlling them, we can cause them to become dependent, weak, unloved, unhappy, angry, and rebellious. So, what can we do? Children gain experience, wisdom, and strength by making their own choices, struggling through their decisions, and learning to live with the

consequences—both the good and the poor ones.

We can share control with our children by giving lots of choices, even from a young age. “Would you like juice or milk for lunch?” “Will you wear your red or your blue shirt today?” “Shall we leave the park now or in 15 minutes?” “Will you do your homework before or after playing outside?” With older children, asking questions can help them think through a problem without telling them what to do. If a child is particularly frustrated, we might say, “Would you like some ideas that other people have tried?” And it is always supportive to communicate that as the parent, “I believe in you—I know that you can figure this out. Let me know if you get stuck.”

For ideas on how to ask guiding questions instead of telling children and young adults what to do:

docs.google.com/document/d/1vj_UtVvFR6PYWNFJK0hxLJ93zdepptwf/edit

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To launch into a meaningful conversation with your middle school, high school and adult kids, avoid questions that can be answered with yes or no. Instead, try some of these open-ended prompts that cannot be responded to with one-word answers.

- **Tell me about _____?** Asking intelligent questions about their areas of expertise allows them to be THE expert! Let them tell you about their job, their career field, and why they love it.
- **Tell me more about what you do each day in your job...**how are your co-workers? How do you handle challenging people? What makes you excited to get up each morning?
- **What do you think about _____?**
- **What does a typical day look like for you?** We used this around the dinner table with two of our adult kids a few months ago, and they loved sharing their days and hearing about each other's days as well.
- **How is _____?** My kids are always grateful when I remember names and ask about their friends.
- **What do you remember about _____?** (There's nothing wrong with a **quick reminder of your shared family history!**)
- **How did you know how to handle ___person/situation___ or what to do?** This will show them that you admire them and want to learn from them. Plus, it will set you up to be able to encourage them!
- **Ask their advice — and be sure to tell them what it is about them that makes you specifically want their advice.** (This demonstrates that you realize your relationship is evolving and acknowledges that they have wisdom to share that is valuable to you.)
- **After your adult child shares about an upcoming plan, event or new career choice...**Tell me more about it. What made you decide to choose this? What do you think it will look like?
- **If money was no object, what would you want to do in the world?**
- **Tell me about how you experience God in the world? Or substitute higher power, etc. Where do you feel most peaceful?**

Ask permission to share your own experiences on a given topic, make sure you are just talking about yourself and not trying to tell them what to do. So much can be learned from simply sitting with someone to hear their story. To listen to their experiences without interruption, without offering solutions, without judgment. Often, what people are seeking most when they share about difficult experiences is to just feel truly heard.

Here are some ideas for how to practice active listening the next time someone shares with you about a personal challenge:

- Instead of offering solutions, ask open-ended questions that help you understand their experience, like "What's on your mind?" or "What has been hard this week?"
- As you're listening, check your understanding by reflecting back the emotions you hear. Try something like: "Figuring how to balance school and friends can be tough." Or "It sounds like not knowing what comes next has been scary." Or "Juggling medical appointments and parenting sounds really draining."