In 1963, Lyman Wynne and Margaret Singer introduced the concept of communication deviance (CD) to describe fragmented patterns of interaction that were characterized by vagueness, interrupting, lack of closure, and irrelevant comments. CD frequently occurs when actions, words, and nonverbal cues regularly contradict each other and are not conducive to direct, clear communication. As the decades persisted, research increasingly indicated that youth who grew up in families where CD is the norm are more likely to exhibit later psychiatric problems, especially schizophrenic symptoms. Much of the research also indicated that patterns of CD are largely stable, persisting over time and in different situations.

As the findings regarding CD emerged, so did a similar vein of research looking at expressed emotion (EE). Individuals and families that are high in EE frequently use hostile and critical means in giving feedback, and parents often become emotionally overinvolved in even minor matters. In combination with CD, it is found that high EE was also associated with worse outcomes in children, especially in the area of psychotic conditions.

All of us as parents engage in these patterns to a certain degree. We are not always clear and direct with what we say. Our actions do not always reflect the words we use and gestures we display. We get angry as sometimes we should. We yell when it is probably least effective, and interrupt when answers might not be far away. So as we enter into this discussion, it is critical to understand that the topic I am broaching is not meant as a condemnation of our imperfect nature as parents, but a conscientious examination of how patterns of communication in our homes make such a difference.

Let’s begin with a simple point of reflection. Think back (and currently) to the ways in which your parents interacted. As a young child growing up, most of us found ourselves discerning just how we would say and do things when we had kids, and often specifically how we would go about things differently. My father was (is) a tremendous parent. But I remember distinctly growing up and thinking that one day when I have children, I wouldn’t walk in from work and yell at them for their shoes being out in the foyer because there were a lot of other things I (he) should be positive about. You will have to ask my kids how well I am holding to that promise today.

Yet regardless of the promises we may make, we will find that many of the ways that our parents communicated do in fact find their way into our homes decades later. Generations after generations often speak in much the same ways. Sometimes it works well; sometimes it does not, especially if the household remains such a tense, confusing place to be. Again, all of us as parents have a right to be angry at times, and none of us ever remain perfectly clear and consistent. But if this becomes the mode of operation, then it behooves us to consider whether a change is in order, and just how this can occur. Otherwise, there is a good likelihood that you will hear your children repeatedly say things to your grandchildren that in your acquired wisdom will make you cringe.

This issue also becomes particularly critical in romantic relationships and marriages. As I previously wrote in my Partner Bill of Rights (see July 2014), every person in a relationship is deserving of communication that does not undermine, disrespect, invalidate, or otherwise disparage him or her in a
devaluing way. If you truly believe in the Golden Rule, then you inherently believe this. Just as our children will most likely learn parenting from us first, so they will also learn how to treat their partner, too. And if being deviant with our communication, and repeatedly hostile and critical is the norm, expect that it very likely will become the standard operating procedure in the next household to follow.

In taking this a step further, consider how CD and EE relate to what John Gottman calls the “Four Horseman” of marriage, which he considers to be the biggest threat to a couple’s happiness and commitment. The first horseman is criticism, which should be differentiated from a complaint. A complaint occurs when a partner voices displeasure with something that has occurred, and almost always begins with an “I” (e.g., “I was frustrated last night when you didn’t clean up while I put the kids to bed like we agreed”). A criticism (often beginning with a “you”) occurs when a person is purposefully degraded or demeaned (e.g., “You are so disorganized”). A second horseman is defensiveness, which is not only characterized by a lack of acknowledgement when wrong has occurred, but also a direct attempt to criticize the other partner as a means of reactive blaming. The third is stonewalling, which is basically characterized by verbal and nonverbal disengagement, or “shutting down.” This occurs when someone diverts their attention to a mobile device, book, or simply leaves the area when a criticism or complaint is given. The final horseman (and considered to be the most detrimental) is contempt, which occurs when a partner displays disgust about the other person. This may occur in the form of eye-rolling, biting sarcasm, mockery, name-calling, or harsh humor.

Again, at any given time, we might find ourselves falling prey to some or all of these horsemen. But when they become a pattern, the underlying framework speaks of CD and EE. Instead of directly taking on the issues at hand, these harmful patterns of communication serve to increase the level of emotion, deflect true responsibility, reduce chances of really working through a problem, and ultimately sabotage true opportunities for growth. Then, the worst part happens. Our kids watch this unveil itself, and don’t have the brainpower and/or life experience to realize that this is not how it is supposed to be, especially when formation can most occur. For all that we directly say and do for our kids, I am increasingly convinced that what probably matters just as much is what we say and do around our kids.

If all of this is true, it brings us back to a realization that is not necessarily an easy one, but potentially a hopeful one. It begins with specific questions, some of which may look like these. What would I have to do to scream and criticize less? What would I have to do to communicate more clearly and honestly? What would I have to do to be more positive? What would I have to do to admit when I am wrong or contradicting? The questions might seem infinite, and the answers might seem elusive, but they really all involve a few time-honored principles and behaviors, of which a partial list of suggestions was presented in my series Turning Distress into Joy (see October 2014). What we all definitely need to make even a little progress (remembering that any progress is still progress) is a meaningful goal, endurance, support, time, and faith. As parents, we spend years of our lives shuttling kids to practices and events, organizing memorable experiences, and providing for the educational needs. But just how much time do we really carve out in the daily task of improving ourselves and counteracting negative patterns, which in the end might make more of a difference than anything else?
A few weeks ago, I sat down with a married couple. The husband had grown up where CD and EE were the norm. It wasn’t until he got married, and he and his wife ventured into the world of parenthood that he realized just how awful the communication had been. For years, their marriage strained at the seams as he and his wife struggled with the unwelcomed reality carried over from his youth, and the continued reality of the in-laws that were. But as the years evolved, and he begun to see that things could be much different, and much better, his focus gradually changed. He set forth on the rocky, vulnerable road of self-improvement, and it had been (and in some ways, still was) rough even as much had improved. But as I looked at them as they held hands, and they talked with great hope and passion about their son, I could not help but think how much I admired him (and her) for the journey that they had undertaken. That for all the astounding things that people do in this world, and all the public accolades that people receive, I am becoming convinced that one of the most amazing, impactful things that occur can be in the ways we choose to speak, when we set forth to change the wrong that has been for the right that lies within.