



continuous conversion

Keep it simple

by Sara Tusek

I've been a junior-high and high-school teacher for the past eleven years. As I keep telling my husband, it's by far the hardest job I've ever had. My previous eight years as a university administrator were a piece of cake compared with teaching. I've learned that students will drain you of all energy and emotion, if you aren't careful to manage your relationship with them by keeping it simple.

You can apply the principle of simplicity to all intense human relationships, I believe. People in close proximity can grate on each other's nerves. Communication, even between people who know each other intimately, can be inexact and hurtful. The closer people are, the more complicated their interactions become; trying to "keep it simple" can uncomplicate and liberate relationships.

The "keep it simple" principle can be summed up in three simple attitudes:

1. respectful attention
2. consistent presence
3. willing forgiveness

respectful attention

The first attitude of simplicity involves treating people with respect, and paying attention to their

ideas and concerns. The underlying principle here is that everyone deserves to be heard. Differences in age, status and accomplishment do not confer upon certain privileged ones the right to ignore or disdain others.

It's not all that difficult to treat people with respect and pay attention to them when we like

them, or when we're not busy, or when they amuse us.



My daughter Melissa's 6th-grade class at Sewanee, TN, keeping it simple

When, on the other hand, we just don't have time to deal with anyone else's "nonsense," it becomes a challenge to remember the simple principle of respectful attention. Stopping to take a deep breath before responding is always helpful. Sometimes vocalizing this attitude helps: to use a bit of "counselor-ese," you can say "I hear you and I respect your right to that opinion."

Practicing respectful attention makes people feel less threatened and upset about their own problems. Your calm demeanor can calm them, too.

Keep it simple

From p. 1

consistent presence

It's a bit more demanding to live out the second attitude, "consistent presence." I once read that men, when polled, chose the thing that they most crave from women to be their presence. Not beauty, not romance, not a clean house—men want women to be near them.

Certainly my dog demonstrates this attitude. He shows his love and devotion to my husband and me in one simple way—he likes to be near us. He will place his body between us, if possible, triangulating the space so that he is equidistant from Jarda and me. He becomes anxious if he can't see both of us at once, and he is most happy—blissful, in fact—when we are together and he is either between us or under us (if possible).

Consistent presence is a very simple concept. Yet it requires constant sacrifice of our own plans and priorities. My students love it when I'm exactly where they want me to be—in my classroom, ready to welcome them. If I'm sick, or go out of town, they're grumpy when I return. They missed me and they want me to know it. The missing me is not so much that they're fond of me (though some are), but that I put a crimp in their day by not being where I "should" be. I always pay a price when I return after being absent, even for the most innocent or even praiseworthy reasons.

Anyone who's parented a toddler knows that consistent presence is the flash point of their relationship. The most sweet-tempered child can become an angry dynamo when the babysitter shows up—yes, the very same babysitter that the child loved last week and will love again tomorrow. The issue is not the babysitter; it's the betrayal (from the child's point-of-view) of the

simple principle of consistent presence on the part of the parent.

willing forgiveness

As in all human relationships, embracing an attitude of being willing to forgive is the key to "keeping it simple."

No matter how careful you are to give respectful attention and provide a consistent presence, there will be times when it all comes crashing down. You can't control all the variables of a relationship by controlling your part (even if you could control yourself perfectly, which you can't do). The other person contributes equally to the balance of the relationship, and erratic actions on his or her part can wreck your simple strategy.

And all of us have times when we just don't want to be reasonable anymore. Maybe we're coming down with a cold, or feeling pressured at work, or are worried about some entirely separate issue. We make the effort to be respectfully attentive and consistently present, but don't get the response we expect, and get mad.

Being willing to forgive is the most important part of keeping it simple. We can forgive ourselves for losing our temper. And oh, yes, we can forgive the other person for "making us" lose our temper—but we know in our hearts that we need the forgiveness more, as we violated our own principles. We forgot to keep it simple.

repeat after me

"Keep it simple." You don't need to understand everything before you apply these three attitudes. You can keep your cool and avoid a melt-down by remembering just this: keep it simple.

