

# VARIETY

## **‘Swap’ yields sincere messages**

### **Therapists break-down show's lessons**

#### **By Betsy Boyd**

Though the splash factor of “Wife Swap” is its fish-out-of-water shenanigans, the program’s staying power comes from the lessons it offers about family life and, in particular, parenting. A quick survey of the psychological community reveals the most important parenting lessons to emerge on the series:

#### **Provide an emotional vocabulary**

Jessica LeRoy, a Los Angeles-based psychologist specializing in women’s issues, admires the way “Wife Swap” invites and instructs kids to address their parents regarding difficult emotional topics.

She references a season-three episode in which sports-competition zealot Tammy Boyd swaps families with Marilyn Milorey, round-the-clock-servant to her laconic, videogame-glued husband and son. Tammy escorts the Miloreys’ son Jayson and his father to their first talk-therapy session, where Jayson discusses his emotional needs quite articulately.

“A lot of times, children haven’t been given emotional vocabulary to express themselves,” LeRoy says. “Giving kids an opportunity to explore how they’re feeling is constructive; it will help them mature and grow as emotional people.”

#### **Model good relationships**

When Rick and Tammy Boyd decide to marry again, as a symbol of their renewed commitment, their children receive an important message about endurance, according to psychologist David Schaich, a clinical director of Amador and Associates in New York and a “Wife Swap” consultant.

“Parents who spend more time together and work on their relationship,” Schaich says, “and demonstrate the importance of bonding as a family teach a lesson that kids never forget.”

#### **Teach kids tolerance**

L.A.-based family therapist Julie Cohen recalls an episode from season three in which hard-rocking mommy Tish Meeks trades families with Kristin Hoover, a devoutly religious mother of three.

“These kids, taking on a heavily religious mother, and vice versa, a rocker mom, are understanding that people can be different, and you can learn from that,” Cohen says. “It’s not something to fear.

“Children’s brains aren’t developed for abstract thought, and tolerance is not a table or chair. If you give kids an experience living with different people, tolerance becomes concrete vs. abstract. They can touch it.”

### **Broaden your universe**

“The whole premise of the show is to make the world look larger,” says Dr. Xavier Amador, chief psychological consultant on “Wife Swap.” “The world is complex, but we’re born into isolated families. This show brings kids into the larger world community. They understand there is a different way to live. It’s not a subtle thing — it’s an epiphany.”