

# 4 Ways to Break the Cycle of Dysfunctional Relationships

One of the difficult aspects of parenting (and, really, life in general) is the balance between doing nothing and trying to control everything. But recognizing God as the one who is ultimately in control of the script of our lives doesn't mean that we do nothing. God is entrusting our children's lives to us as parents. He is asking us to take care of them in an imperfect world. We seldom know all we should or should not do in any given situation, and this is why we need to be in constant and personal communication with God so that we can receive His wisdom (James 3:17, 1 Cor. 1:25).

One of the best ways to be a good parent to our children is to be a faithful son or daughter to our heavenly Father (because we can't give away something we don't have). When we need to *give away* wisdom, encouragement, strength, and forgiveness to our children, we need to be *receiving* those things from God as well.

So what do we do in this tension of doing nothing or micro-managing everything?

One tool that I have found helpful is to remember four steps. These words all begin with *IN* because it's a great reminder to each of us that God wants to "be in it" with us, and He wants us to "be in it" with our family members—but in healthy and helping ways, not overbearing or codependent ways.

Let's take a look at these four steps that help give a framework to what we can do when we want to create healthy relationships, boundaries and solutions with family members.

## **Intake**

The heart posture for *Intake* is to offer listening and love to

your family member. In a world where everyone just wants to say something, listening is a gift. You want to make sure that when you listen, you also give eye contact, undivided attention and verbal cues to allow your child or spouse to know he is being heard.

After you listen to your family member, ask questions. Doing so will demonstrate that you fully understand what he is sharing. These questions can be asked for clarification or to determine specific feelings about the situation.

What is critical for this step is that your family member feels that he is in a safe and nonjudgmental environment. It's often hard to not look shocked and appalled, but as best as you can, try to listen in love.

And last, prayerfully put yourself in your family member's situation, and ask God to cultivate compassion in your heart to give you a perspective of understanding and empathy.

## **Investigate**

The heart posture for *Investigate* is to receive counsel and then offer it to your family member. As a spiritual parent who is seeking to have a spiritually healthy family, you want to receive counsel from God's perspective first. Praying with and for your child (or other family member) is a powerful way to build your faith together while declaring who is ultimately in control.

You can investigate His Word or receive counsel from your pastor or other Christian friends. In a generation where the world is telling your child that there is no objective truth, you can build her trust in His Word as the best place for finding out what is true and good. It's also important to solicit a professional in the area you are discussing.

## **Instigate**

The posture of the heart for *Instigate* is to offer encouragement and confidence to your child. In this step you want your family member to take a baby step, but that step should be his idea. If he owns it, he is more likely to act upon it.

You can ask questions to help your family member determine what this step should be. But, ultimately, this is where you really want to partner with God's Spirit to have your child or other family member hear from God (not merely your voice telling him what to do). Cheer him on with positive support about his decision to act.

Next you can together determine "homework." This is something that will be followed up on as a result of the baby step that your child has come up with. It should have a due date with the understanding that you will be holding him accountable to his goal.

Keep in mind that often a baby step can be to confront, confess, or simply have a conversation with someone. Sometimes it's about displaying a contrite heart before God.

## **Integrate**

The heart posture for *Integrate* is offering support. This is different from doing it for your child or family member (which, as a parent, I find I often want to do). The Micro-Managing parent wants to rescue, not necessarily come alongside of, in order to empower. After you hold your child accountable to her "homework" from *Instigate*, you want to celebrate her progress. Acknowledge the courage or the faith it took to take action, and then rejoice together.

What will allow this to be more than a onetime act (and actually more spiritually healthy for a lifetime) will be to determine the next steps immediately. Again, you should allow this to be your family member's idea—not yours.

Finally, determine who will hold your family member accountable for the long run. (That person is usually a parent when your children are young, but when they are older, it can be a mentor, teacher or coach.)

As you finish these steps, it's important to continue to pray with and for your family member. Of course, as our children get older, and when the situation involves multiple people, the steps may be drawn out over weeks or even months. And these steps are in no way magically formulaic. Still, our children need to have this pattern of steps repeated over and over again in their lives for them to understand how to live as broken people in a broken world with other broken people.

*For practical examples of these steps and more, read Becoming a Spiritually Healthy Family: Avoiding 6 Dysfunctional Parenting Styles by Michelle Anthony.*

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