

The Signs of a Dysfunctional Family

No one who starts a family plans on falling into patterns of dysfunction, but between the baggage of the past and the pressures of the world today, developing destructive parenting patterns is all too easy. Family ministry leader Dr. Michelle Anthony has now brought hope and practical help to parents in her new book, *Becoming a Spiritually Healthy Family: Avoiding the 6 Dysfunctional Parenting Styles*.

Outlining the six most common dysfunctional parenting styles, such as the “I-Can’t-Say-No Parent,” the “Criticizing Parent” and the “Double-Minded Parent,” Anthony offers grace to parents who fall short, while providing practical tips, advice, activities and reflective questions at the end of each chapter that will help parents envision what it looks like for a family to follow Jesus and not the seductive alternatives the world offers.

Q: In the book, you present six dysfunctional parenting styles. Of those six, which do you think is the most common?

All of these represent the common dysfunctions in today’s families. What is interesting about them is that these are the “acceptable” dysfunctions ... so much so that we don’t normally think of these styles as “dysfunctional.” We tend to think of addiction and abuse as dysfunctional, but things such as control and friendship in parenting as good things. So when these things begin to creep into the excessive category we simply justify we are doing more of a good thing rather than engaging in a habit stemming from a place of brokenness or dysfunction.

I have found rarely do we fit neatly into one category. Often we see many of these dysfunctions and/or their tendencies woven together in our lives. Once we take our eyes off God’s

plan, this loss of focus opens up our families to all kinds of “acceptable” dysfunctions simply to survive.

Q: What have you done to avoid dysfunction in your own parenting?

I have seen all of these dysfunctions in my parenting at one point or another. At the root of these dysfunctions is sin. Because I am sinful, I am susceptible to any and all of these every day. The best way to be a spiritually healthy parent is to be a spiritually healthy individual. I thrive as a parent when I am living in concert with God’s way and keeping a pure and humble heart before Him. When I am regularly in God’s Word, bringing all things to Him in prayer and thankfulness and being honest about my need for Him, my kids reap the benefits of having a mom who is living with Christ’s love and grace. Yet when I live my life on my own terms and neglect His Word and my prayer life, my sin seems less offensive. Then my kids and those in my family are victims of my selfishness.

Q: What should a parent do if they recognize themselves in the descriptions of dysfunctional parents you’ve included in *Becoming a Spiritually Healthy Family*?

The first part is simply to recognize the dysfunctional behavior. Next, to accept responsibility for its presence instead of blaming others is important too. Once this has taken place, I encourage parents to have a conversation with God about it—simply as if you were sharing it with a friend. God is not going to be surprised by what we say; He already knows it all. He is gracious and loving and will give us wisdom right away on how to deal with things in a more God-honoring and healthy manner. Often God will use a close friend, pastor or counselor to bring clarity to the next steps, so we should seek those individuals in our lives for fresh perspective and accountability.

Q: Why is it important for parents to identify whether or not they were themselves parented in a dysfunctional style?

If we can understand where we came from, often it will inform where we are going. Parents typically fall into either repeating sin patterns that were handed down to them or they will swing the pendulum to the opposite extreme and begin a new dysfunction in an almost-rebellious response that is motivated by a heart that does not want to repeat how their parents did it. Neither of these extremes solves the problem. Yet taking an honest assessment of how we were parented and the good and bad impact it has had on us creates an environment for parents to make healthy and appropriate adjustments to their new families.

Q: What does a spiritually healthy family look like?

A spiritually healthy family is made up of members who, in a relationship with Jesus, seek to understand and live a surrendered life to God's plan and will. Through God's Word they learn this plan, are convicted by God's Spirit to understand sin areas and allow forgiveness and grace to heal broken places in their lives. They understand that without God's help and power, they will not be able to live in peace or victory.