

Breaking the Cycle

How to keep family dysfunction from claiming the next generation

By Gary A. Sprague

Norm and Lily met at college in the early 1950s. Together they began a romantic journey; then Lily found out she was pregnant. They quit school and got married. Norm's father provided him with a good job and a home.

Norm and Lily played house for five years amid emotional abuse, fighting and failure to resolve conflict. Finally, Lily left Norm and, with their two small children, moved in with her parents. After a brief separation, Lily returned to try and make things work. Five more years and another baby later, they separated again – this time for good. After 10 years of marriage, Norm and Lily divorced.

Ted and Lisa met at college in the early 1970s. Together they began a romantic journey; then Lisa found out she was pregnant. Ted and Lisa lived together while they continued working on their college degrees. They both graduated with honors and were married shortly afterward.

Ted and Lisa played house for the next six years amid emotional abuse, fighting and failure to resolve conflict. Finally, Ted moved out of the house and into a small apartment on the edge of town. After a brief separation, they reunited, determined to make things work. Two more years and a lot of unresolved conflict later, they separated again – this time for good. After eight years of marriage, Ted and Lisa divorced.

Ted and Lisa's story is much like Norm and Lily's. But that shouldn't surprise us, since Ted is Norm and Lily's son. Why did Ted follow the same cycle of divorce as his parents?

Children Carry Patterns Into Adulthood

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead says in her article, "Dan Quayle Was Right" (The Atlantic Monthly, April 1993): "Difficulties associated with family breakup often continue into adulthood. Children who grow up in single-parent or blended families are often less successful as adults, especially in the areas of love and work. Research shows that many children from disrupted families have a harder time achieving intimacy in relationships or in holding steady jobs."

My parents divorced in 1965. I have worked hard in my own life to learn and overcome the patterns that caused this event, especially in the area of communication. I was taught by my parents to avoid conflict and walk away from uncomfortable confrontations. "Don't talk about it," my family would say. "Close your eyes and pretend the conflict doesn't exist."

Today I am the director of Kids Hope ministries, which helps children heal from the pain of loss. We see firsthand how kids can bring curses into adulthood, so we concentrate on overcoming them.

Ted carried his family's dysfunctional behavior patterns into his own marriage. If he had been able to address and resolve the unhealthy concerns in his parents' marriage, he might have had a better chance at saving his own.

Beneath the Surface

For children to break the cycle of single parenting, they *must* face the unhealthy patterns that existed before them.

- Maintain honesty.

My parents divorced when I was 5. My dad moved out and the guy who lived across the street moved in. I later found out that Dad sat my two older brothers down to explain why he was leaving, but he thought I was too young.

Everyone pretended the situation was normal. But when I was 12, I discovered that the actual divorce was finalized in November, only one month before my mom got remarried. I had a thousand questions that needed to be answered – honestly. I remember asking my mom, “What month did Dad move out?” I received no reply.

Whether the relationship my mom had with the guy across the street caused my parents’ divorce was not the issue. The problem was that it began a pattern throughout my childhood of expecting dishonesty. If the truth had been shared, it would have helped me in the healing process. I grew up not being able to trust my parents, and this lack of trust grew into feelings of insecurity.

Honesty is the best policy because it lays everything on the table and creates an environment where love, forgiveness and restoration can take place.

➤ Allow talk about uncomfortable matters.

As Bambi takes his first steps in the forest, he trips and falls in front of Thumper and his family.

Thumper asks, “What’s the matter? Did the young prince fall down? Is he hurt?”

Bambi’s mother answers, “No, he’s all right.”

Thumper goes on to say, “He doesn’t walk very good, does he?”

“Thumper!” his mother says quickly.

“Yes, Mama?” Thumper replies.

“What did your father tell you this morning?” asks his mother.

Thumper sheepishly repeats, “If you can’t say somethin’ nice, don’t say nothin’ at all.”

One winter morning, I was sitting at our dining room table paying a mountain of bills while my two small children were watching this 1942 Walt Disney classic. When I heard the interaction between Thumper and his mother, I thought to myself, *Walt Disney unintentionally helped to create the dysfunctional family!*

It is important for kids to see their parents talking to each other and working through conflict. What our generation learned from this unwritten rule was that you can talk about nice things, but you can’t bring up a subject that is hard to deal with. “Don’t disagree with me.” “Don’t tell me the truth about how you feel about me.” “Kids are to be seen but not heard.” We stifled a generation of kids who had something to say but were not allowed to say it. When this gag rule is modeled to our kids, they can carry this unhealthy pattern into the next generation.

➤ Let them share deep feelings.

Eight-year-old Paul came to our summer camp. He was the master of negative attention-seeking behavior. After we found out about his home situation, we knew why. Paul lived with his father (at least when his dad was home). Paul’s dad was an alcoholic who worked at a garage during the day and drank at the local tavern at night.

Paul had come home from school one day to find all his mother's belongings in the front yard. His dad was kicking her out of the house. Paul grew afraid to *share* his feelings, let alone *feel* his feelings. He thought that if he did, he would be kicked out as well.

We must give our children opportunities to identify, express and resolve their feelings. Kids will respond positively when we acknowledge their emotions, and this will set them on the road to effective communication when they are adults.

➤ Teach God's availability.

Jessica, 7 years old, also came to our summer camp, where she heard me say that Jesus is the solid rock and can always be counted on. I shared Hebrews 13:5, in which God says: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

Afterward, Jessica told me that her mother had abandoned the family and moved to another state with her boyfriend. Her two younger sisters were living with their father, but Jessica went to live with her grandmother when there wasn't enough room at her dad's house. Jessica interpreted this to mean that no one loved or wanted her. As I prayed for the right words to say to her, I said, "'A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling'" (Psalm 68:5).

Jessica looked at me and asked, "Can God be a mother to the motherless, too? I sure need one."

Kids need to be able to count on their parents to model honesty, be strong spiritual leaders, listen to them and care. If kids are taught to only count on themselves, they will carry this unhealthy pattern into the next generation.

Reasons for Family Breakups

"Why did my parents separate?" This question is central to helping kids stop damaging cycles. If kids know why their parents split up, this will help them avoid the same pattern in their own marriages.

Adultery. Our society uses a nice-sounding word, "affair," to describe what is really adultery. We asked kids in our seminars to define adultery, and here are some answers we received:

- Going out on a date with someone
- Having a boyfriend or girlfriend
- Living with someone
- Having an affair
- Kissing someone
- Sleeping with someone
- Having a fight with your spouse
- Leaving your family.

It is important for kids to know exactly what adultery is and that it is a sin with far-reaching consequences. This information should be imparted in ways appropriate for their levels of development.

A 7-year-old might better understand it if we say Mommy or Daddy was pretending to be married to someone else.

Abandonment. At a family retreat I headed, we asked the kids to write letters to their mothers and fathers. They were encouraged to do this assignment even if they had no contact with one of their parents. Such was the case with Alex. His father had left when his mother became pregnant with the boy, and his mom had never told him anything about his dad.

The next day, I saw the beginnings of God's healing touch. Alex's mom explained to him that his dad had problems accepting responsibility for a family, not Alex himself. And Alex wrote a letter to his dad. The

most critical issue was for Alex to be released from the burden of not knowing why his dad had left and the guilt that he was the reason for that decision.

Abuse. I worked on the south side of Chicago as a foster-care and adoption caseworker. I learned a lot about abuse during those three years and about passing curses on in a cycle that is difficult to break.

I will never forget Patty and her five children. Patty was physically and sexually abused by her father as a child. When she grew older, she became involved in abusive relationships with several men. One of these men abused two of her children. No matter what we did to help Patty and her children, she would not change.

If abuse is allowed to be cycled from generation to generation, it is hard to stop. We need to educate our children about abuse and what they can do to stop it. Kids should know that if their safety is in danger, they must tell someone so they can be protected. And abusers need to get professional help.

Addiction. Frank's grandfather was an alcoholic. He provided for his family as a coal miner, but he was absent emotionally from the family. Frank's father, however, determined not to drink. He, too, provided for his family, but to numb the pain of his childhood, he lost himself in his work and in climbing the corporate ladder.

Frank determined to do something with his life that had spiritual significance. Driven by his bitter childhood, he went to seminary. When he graduated, he was asked to start a church. Frank's drive turned into long hours of hard work for the kingdom of God and neglect of his family. His wife and three children were also left fatherless.

The addiction that Frank's grandfather had to alcohol was passed down to Frank's father as an addiction to work. That, in turn, was passed on to Frank as an addiction to the ministry.

Once and for All

Remember Ted from the beginning of our story? He received some Christian counseling and has worked through the confusion and anger of his childhood. He has addressed how the unhealthy patterns in his parents' marriage affected his own. While he doesn't blame his parents, he is now looking at their shortcomings and discovering ways to change these in his own life.

Ted is spending quality time with his own son, who is now an adult and engaged to be married. He talks openly with his son about the unhealthy patterns in his marriage and the reasons for the divorce. Ted is doing his part to help his son break the cycle.

But the greatest tools Ted or anyone else can use in breaking curses like family breakups are prayer and the Word of God. God loves our families even more than we do. In fact, the family was the first unit He established in the beginning of time.

Throughout the Bible, we find many people who interceded for their families. Abraham modeled the first known act of intercession in God's Word. He convinced God not to destroy Sodom until a way of escape had been prepared for his nephew Lot. Rahab refused to hide Joshua's spies unless they agreed to save her whole family from destruction (Joshua 2:12-13). Then in Hebrews 11:7, we read how Noah built the ark "to save his family," not the animals.

Our greatest responsibility as parents is to pray for our children. In doing so, we can stand on Scriptures like Proverbs 26:2: "As the bird by wandering, as the swallow by flying, so the curse causeless shall not come" (KJV). According to Deuteronomy 28, curses belong to the disobedient and blessings to the obedient children of God.

So if you and I are in Christ and are living our lives for Him, we have the right – and the responsibility – to pray down the blessings and to break the curses on our children. That's good news for the single parent.

(Reprinted from *Single-Parent Family*, January 1996, a Focus of the Family production. Gary Sprague lives with his wife, Lois, and their five children in Colorado. To learn more about Kids Hope seminars, call 719-687-0515.)