

CHAPTER 9

Proactive Strategies to Make Life Easier

It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.

— Ephesians 1:11-12 (*The Message*)

Our God is purposeful. From before the beginning of time, He's had an "overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone" (Ephesians 1:12, *The Message*). Even before Adam and Eve first sinned, God had a plan for our redemption. Throughout the Old Testament we read of God's preparation that would reveal, in the fullness of time, His plan for the redemption of this fallen world.

In every facet from creation forward, God has a plan, and He is always prepared and at work to accomplish it for His good pleasure. We see this in the beginning as God spoke creation into existence. My childhood pastor used to whimsically quip: "You don't see God creating fish on the first day and saying 'Hey guys, if you will just flop around on dry ground until the third or fourth day, I promise that I will get around to making water.'" No, even when we don't see it or cannot understand it, we are assured that our God has a plan, and He will accomplish it.

Preparing for the Challenges

One of my favorite examples of this from Scripture is the story of Esther. The book of Esther not only reminds us of God's plan and provision for the Jews, it offers practical tools for us today as well.

In the face of an evil plot by Haman to annihilate the Jews, Queen Esther, herself an orphan adopted by her cousin Mordecai, bravely stepped forward and overcame her fears to save her people. Although God is never mentioned in the book of Esther, we clearly see His hand at work in the lives of both Esther and Mordecai. Esther didn't sit back or shirk from the difficult and even dangerous task before her. Instead, she realized that God had placed her in a position of influence and given her a pur-

pose for “such a time as this.” She realized that she needed to be courageous, faithful and proactive in order to be used by God to accomplish that purpose. Esther was faced with a true life or death situation. Rather than ignoring the situation, waiting for someone else to step in and solve it or simply hoping that it would go away, she took initiative and employed a proactive approach. Based on the account of her step-by-step approach in persuading King Xerxes (Esther 5-7) to reverse the edict to kill all Jews, it is clear that not only was Esther proactive, she was determined and courageous.

In the face of the repeated and persistent challenges that we face with our children, we would do well to follow Esther’s lead in both being proactive and preparing to meet and, as often as possible, prevent such challenges, even as we rely on the guiding hand and provision of God. Many of us know all too well those situations, places and activities that trigger our children. Knowing this, we and our children would be well served if we intentionally take practical steps to help our children better navigate these environments and avoid the typical fallout. Some of these practical steps are detailed in Chapter 9 of *The Connected Child*, and they include anticipating and managing transitions and separation, establishing choices ahead of time, watching for signs of overload and practicing how to interact with strangers, just to name a few.

Setting Our Children Up to Succeed

Despite our best efforts, our children will make mistakes and wrong choices, which will certainly provide for great teaching moments; however, acknowledging this reality is far different from “allowing” them to fail or setting them up to do so simply to create a teaching moment. We must recognize that too many children from hard places are overwhelmed by a deep sense of shame and feel as if they are hopeless, worthless and beyond help. They are keenly aware of their many failures and faults, have come to expect that they will fail and believe that we expect the same. As a result, they often oblige by meeting their own low expectations. And considering that many of them experience deeply held feelings of rejection, inadequacy and low self-worth, it is clear that our children need us to be consistently cheering for their success and setting them up to succeed as much as we possibly can. We need to understand that this is undoubtedly a significant responsibility of all parents of children from hard places.

We believe this approach also clearly reflects the heart of God. In the book of James we read that God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt us to do evil (James 1:13). Simply put, God never sets us up for moral failure even though He is not shy about using our failures and faults as teaching moments. With this in mind it is important that parents avoid the trap of ‘lying in wait’ for their children to fail in order to teach them a lesson. Our kids will stumble and fall frequently thereby providing us with ample opportunities to correct, teach and forgive. The truth is that we as parents will do the same, providing our Heavenly Father with no shortage of opportunities to correct, teach and forgive us. Just as God does with His children, we need to proactively plan and prepare to help our children succeed, and we need to be sure to praise them when they do.

Setting the Temperature for My Child

By Amy Monroe

I still vividly remember the battles we used to wage with one of our sons. Had we known then what we know now, our initial approach and the early outcomes would have been so very different.

This particular son deals with a significant amount of anxiety and worry. By nature he is somewhat of an introvert, but for as long as I can recall he has also been a highly anxious child. We've seen this anxiety manifest itself in many different ways, often affecting his behavior significantly and trapping him in a maze of fear and worry. What we've also come to learn is that there was much more going on in his little body than merely anxiety.

A simple example of this is that for many years he resisted transitioning from long sleeve shirts to short sleeve shirts and then back again as the seasons and temperatures changed. This may not seem like a big deal, but when your child insists on wearing long sleeves with shorts and flip-flops in the 100 degree heat of July, it begins to create some issues. Not recognizing this and similar situations for what they were—a sensory processing issue coupled with more than a little desire for control—we, like many parents, treated this behavior as straight forward stubbornness and defiance. We attempted to change his resistance first by reasoning and bargaining with him. When that failed we quickly moved to lectures, threats and imposing consequences. Rather than achieving any meaningful change, however, all we managed to do was increase his anxiety and physical discomfort as well as our frustration.

Another issue that he's consistently struggled with (even to this day) is the fear of being left or forgotten. Again, this may seem rather insignificant, but when it begins to dominate your family's planning for every outing (school, church, parties, piano practice, etc.) and causes major anxiety and leads to serious meltdowns, it is no longer insignificant. Our son would be the first to tell you that we have never left him, but even though he had no real basis for his fear, the fear was nonetheless very real to him. No amount of explaining or lecturing him about how we would never leave or forget him seemed to have any effect. The fact of the matter was that he did not feel safe and that lack of felt safety was paralyzing him and threatening to do the same to us.

After reading *The Connected Child* and talking with other parents who were facing similar situations, we realized that we hadn't been setting our son up to succeed—and not only in these areas. The reality is that we had allowed him to set the direction and as a result we kept following him head-long into challenge after challenge. Thinking about it in different terms, we had relegated our role as parents to being a thermometer of sorts—merely reflecting the temperature that he (with his anxiety and other issues) was setting—rather than being a thermostat and regulating what the temperature should be.

It was clearly time for us to become far more intentional and proactive to help our son learn how to better handle these and other situations, and to bring more joy back to our day-to-day experience with him. We approached the next change of season quite differently. Well before the upcoming season arrived we calmly talked with him about how we all would be changing the type of clothes we would be wearing. We also asked him to try to explain to us why he didn't want to wear certain shirts. As we helped him search for the right words to explain what he was experiencing we discovered some not so insignificant sensory issues such as the tags in many of his shirts made him

very uncomfortable—something that can be fixed quite easily with a pair of scissors. What’s more, as we patiently and calmly listened to him on this issue he began to express himself more clearly on other subjects as well. And as we began to establish choices for him ahead of time (such as “today you can wear your long sleeve shirt until lunch but when we go to the park to play I would like you to choose one of these two short sleeve shirts or tank tops to wear”) we met with far less resistance to change.

As for the fears relating to being left behind, we began to be far more intentional about helping him know exactly what was going to happen in advance. We established regular pick up locations and times, and we moved heaven and earth to be sure that we were consistently in the right place at the right time. We helped create more consistency in our routines and helped him anticipate transitions throughout each day by doing small things such as taking the initiative to “check in” with him every 15 minutes while he was playing in the backyard or buying him a digital watch to wear so he would know what time we would be there to pick him up.

After several months of being intentional, proactive and consistent we began to see many of his fears dissipate. These and other steps created more predictability for him and allowed us to help set the temperature for him, rather than merely reflecting and reacting to whatever temperature he might set. In addition, this approach enabled us to develop more understanding, compassion and genuine empathy for him as we have seen him confront and in many ways overcome his anxiety. While we still have many challenges yet to conquer, I am confident that with us setting the temperature we are on the right track.

Key Scripture Verses

As Jesus concluded the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) he offered important instruction to his listeners (and to us) about how to apply all that he had taught them.

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

—Matthew 7:24-27 (NIV)

Building a Solid Foundation

Many adoptive and foster parents have learned from experience that while there are certainly blessings and joys that mark the journey, it also comes with more than a few challenges, disappointments and heartaches along the way. In light of this undeniable reality, being proactive and prepared is really not an option for those parents who are committed to doing all they can to help their children heal and flourish. Of course there are no guarantees in life or in the adoption or foster care journey, other than the assurance that God will never leave or forsake us and that our faithfulness is not in vain.

With this in mind, being intentional, proactive and prepared to set our children up for success are key elements for building a strong foundation. It is critical that we not think of building connections, developing trust and all of the strategies that we advocate merely as tools used for responding to problems or misbehavior. After all, thinking in terms of the passage from Matthew 7:24-27, what we are building is a house in which we want to live—or in our case, a relationship with our children that is warm and joyful—not a storm shelter. Therefore, parents must spend even more time implementing this approach and employing these tools in proactive and preventative ways. Otherwise, we run the risk of being like the man that Jesus spoke of at the end of Matthew 7—building our relationship with our children on a shaky foundation because we have failed to act based on all that we have learned. Just as Jesus taught that our ultimate foundation is God’s Word put into action, we as parents must act on the insights and tools we have been provided in order to build a solid foundation for our children.

As we travel the adoption journey and live out the call that God has given us we know that at times the rains will come, the streams will rise and the winds will blow against us and our children. Nevertheless, we know that God is with us in the midst of these challenges and trials, and that He is at work for our good (Romans 8:28). This is why we can, as James 1:2 says, “consider it pure joy whenever [we] face trials of many kinds,” because we know that God is not only doing a good work through us, He is doing a good work in us as well. An important part of this good work in our journey is learning to be proactive and intentional as we help our children overcome their past and establish a solid foundation for a more hope-filled future.

Questions to Consider and Discuss:

- 1. In what areas of your parenting do you feel unprepared or lacking an adequate plan?**
- 2. In what ways have you set your child up to succeed? In what ways have you intentionally or inadvertently set your child up to fail?**
- 3. Does your child expect himself/herself to fail much of the time? Does your child believe that you expect him/her to fail at certain things? How can you go about changing both your and his/her expectations?**
- 4. What are some specific ways that you can become more proactive, intentional or prepared in terms of parenting your child and setting him/her up to succeed?**