

CHAPTER 11

Handling Setbacks

The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

— Psalm 103:8 (NIV)

God’s history with mankind is a history of Him dealing with our faults, failures and sin. Were it not for His great patience with us and the setbacks we experience, the story of man would have been one very brief chapter. Even as we look at the “heroes” of the Bible, we find this list of great men and women replete with those who failed and yet found strength in God’s grace to try again. Moses, Elijah, Sampson, David and Peter—we see God time and time again graciously and mercifully extending opportunities for “re-do’s.”

Being Intentional to Remember

As loving parents, we know our children learn just like we do—through trial and error. When babies first start to walk, we understand they will fall many times before they are steady on their feet. We understand that even into adulthood there will be occasions when we will stumble and fall.

For parents of at-risk children, setbacks can be particularly discouraging, but they are an unavoidable and even necessary part of the journey. It is always important in the face of these setbacks to remember just how far you and your child have come.

After starting a therapeutic home-based program, the mother of an aggressive 11-year-old boy kept a log on her calendar to track changes in his behavior. She recorded an “A” for the good days and a “B” for the not-so-good ones. Below are the results the mother recorded over a 14-week period:

Week 1:	BABBBBB
Week 2:	BBBBBAB
Week 3:	BAABABB
Week 4:	BBBBBBB
Week 5:	BBBBBBB
Week 6:	AABBBAA

Week 7:	ABAAAAB
Week 8:	AAABABA
Week 9:	AABABAA
Week 10:	BAAAAAA
Week 11:	BAAABAA
Week 12:	ABBAABA
Week 13:	AAABABA
Week 14:	AAAABAA

As you can see, this troubled child started with only one good day for each of the first two weeks and after a little progress the following week he experienced a significant setback (in weeks 4 and 5). But his parents refused to give up, and as a result they began to see dramatic progress after only a few more weeks. By the end of 14 weeks, the original trend had completely turned around, with the child having only one not-so-good day during the final week. As time went on, if either of them became discouraged by setbacks this mother would pull out the calendar to remember just how far they had come by working together and consistently applying the approach we advocate in *The Connected Child*. This tangible reminder gave them the hope as well as the motivation they needed to keep going.

We see an example of this type of intentional remembering in the Old Testament practice of observing the Shabbat, or the holy day of rest also known as the Sabbath. Shabbat was a special celebration focused on faith and family. The family table was traditionally adorned with special settings and candles, and special foods were prepared. Shabbat was also a time for family celebration in which the father would play games with the children. This special day served as the anchor for the entire week. Three days before Shabbat the parents would speak with their children about its coming, reminding them of all they would do on that day. Preparations began with the children helping cook foods and prepare the arrangements. Most importantly, Shabbat was a day of remembering all that God had done. Observance of Shabbat in this very intentional manner allowed this holy day to permeate the week and reflected what some have called the “rhythm of the sacred”—to *hope/anticipate* for three days of preparation, to *experience/celebrate* Shabbat and then to *remember/reflect* for the three days following.

Because of their early histories, many of our children have few happy memories of their past, and all too often they have little hope for their future. Setbacks are likely to create a sense of hopelessness in them. That is why it is so important that parents practice this principle of remembering with their children. We must remember how far we have come and all that God has done to make that possible. This kind of intentional remembering can become an effective tool for guiding both you and your child through the inevitable setbacks that are part of the adoption journey.

Getting on the Right Track

By Michael & Amy Monroe

We know that children from hard places react in one of three ways when their fear response is activated: fight, flight or freeze. Our son, Carter, now five years old, was adopted from Guatemala, and from the time that he came home his response to fear, stress and pain has always been flight. As

we sometimes say, he's a runner.

When he was younger, if he got into a tiff with his siblings and got his feelings hurt or if he simply didn't get his way, he took off. If we asked him to do something he didn't want to do or got onto him for misbehaving, he would react by trying to escape and hide. Over time this response became so pervasive that even when he would fall and get hurt he would run through the house and hide, while crying hysterically.

Unfortunately, we didn't always recognize this response for what it was—a fear response. We would often scold or discipline him for running off or try to ignore him altogether, but neither approach worked to calm him or resolve the situation. As Carter grew a bit older, these episodes became more frequent, to the point that they occurred nearly every day. Sometimes they would escalate and last nearly an hour, and occasionally even longer. One instance began when Carter was playing ball outside and fell and skinned his knee. Immediately he began crying hysterically, his body becoming rigid as he screamed and yelled. As we approached him to check his injury, he was unable to run off and escape so instead he became verbally and physically aggressive.

We were frustrated but wanted to help him, so shortly before Carter turned four we began responding to these episodes very differently. In response to incidents that would usually send Carter fleeing, we would quickly go to him and try to calm him using an abundance of nurture. As we held him close, patted him and even rocked him at times, we were also quick to lovingly encourage Carter to try to calm himself and use his words to tell us what had happened or where he was hurt. Almost immediately, we began to see significant improvement. While Carter's instinctive response is still to flee in reaction to being hurt, mistreated or slighted, he is now better able to calm himself and explain what happened, often returning to play in only a few minutes.

Running away had been his standard response for nearly three years with no signs of improvement. But when we decided to handle these situations differently, his reaction improved dramatically, and he began to master new ways to cope. Make no mistake, Carter is still a runner—but now he doesn't always run and when he does he typically doesn't "go far." Even though he is still inclined to return to his old habits and behaviors (sometimes at the most inopportune or embarrassing moments), the progress has been remarkable and we are quick to remember and remind him of that. More important, we are now better prepared to handle those times when he (and we) revert back to the old way of responding because we are mindful of our progress, and we are confident that together we are on the right track.

Key Scripture Verses

Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way. If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get his help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it.

—James 1:2-5 (*The Message*)

Needing Help and Asking for It

I love the opening words in the Book of James. They are refreshingly honest and encouraging, especially for parents with children from hard places. These words remind us that God is at work in the very midst of the trials of life, both taking away from (refining us under pressure) and adding to (maturing and developing our character) who we are so that we may ultimately become more like Him.

James also makes clear that God is ever ready to hear our cries for help and is willing and able to respond. In fact, James tells us, “He loves to help” (James 1:5, *The Message*). So why has it become unacceptable—even a sign of weakness or failure—for parents of children from hard places to need or seek help? Tragically, this tendency seems to be prevalent in more than a few of our churches, where the pressure to be “normal” and have kids who are always well-behaved can be almost overwhelming. This pressure is often acutely felt by adoptive and foster parents.

Based on what we know of Scripture, this aversion to admitting the need for help and being willing to seek it is neither biblical nor healthy. The fact of the matter is that all families who adopt and foster children from hard places will need help from their family, friends, church family and certainly their Heavenly Father. This help, in ways both large and small, must always be practical and should be offered freely without judgment or shame. After all, if God loves to help in the midst of our trials, shouldn’t His children be willing and even eager to do the same?

As followers of Christ, we know that in this world we will have trouble (John 16:33). In the Gospels we are reminded that following Christ is costly, and following Him along the adoption journey will certainly be no different. Yet, we know that following Christ, no matter what the cost, is always worth it. We know God is at work in all things to accomplish His purposes, and the trials, suffering and setbacks of the adoption journey are no exception. There is hope and there is help; parents need to seek and cling to both.

Questions to Consider and Discuss:

1. What setbacks are you currently dealing with in your adoption journey? What setbacks are you currently dealing with in your life in general?
2. How do you see God at work in the midst of these setbacks?
3. What challenges are you facing for which you need help from others? Where can you turn for that help? What is preventing or holding you back from seeking that help?

4. List three ways in which your child’s behavior and/or your relationship with your child has improved, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant.

5. What are some ways that you can be more intentional about “remembering” your child’s progress and successes?