

Chapter 13

Overcoming Tough Situations at Home

No family is perfect, and every family has its difficulties. Sometimes parents and children do not agree. At other times, parents cannot get along with one another. Some children grow up with another relative or otherwise live away from their parents. Some families fight and argue a lot; others are silent and angry. Some families have a hard time communicating with each other. In many families, the original parents are divorced, and sometimes stepparents come onto the scene. Depending on the circumstances and personalities of everyone involved, this may be a serious or a not-so-serious adjustment.

If you have a difficult home life—if your parents fight constantly, if you are always in trouble for things you haven't really done wrong, if someone has a substance abuse problem, or if you feel very unhappy with your family—hang on, because life can get better. Some kids grow up in a chaotic home, and it is very hard for them to concentrate at school or to develop



friendships because they are afraid that someone outside of their family will see the condition of their home life. Some kids grow up with emotional or physical abuse. It is not your fault if you are abused. There is nothing that you have done which makes you deserve being abused. Abuse is never okay.

If you are having serious family problems, you might face extra obstacles. You might have to work harder than someone else to reach your goals and dreams. You may have to learn how to manage difficult emotions even though you are still young. We are convinced that you can overcome the problems, and be a healthy person. People like George Washington, Oprah Winfrey, and Beethoven had extremely difficult family lives when they were younger. As adults they were able to become great leaders, touch the lives of thousands of people, and compose music which would become famous all over the world. The skills you learn now in overcoming your difficulties may help you in the future when you face other problems.

Whether you would like to learn to get along better with your family members, or if you are facing serious problems, you all have one thing in common—you are part of a family. Let's take a look at families and dealing with hard situations.

Understanding the Other Person's Point of View

In any difficult situation with your parents, brother, sisters, friends or anyone else, there are a few steps to think through that may help you to work things out. Begin by asking:

- ☉ *What is the problem?*
- ☉ *Who are the people involved?*
- ☉ *How do you think the other people feel?*
- ☉ *How are you a part of the problem?*
- ☉ *Can you do anything to help solve the problem?*

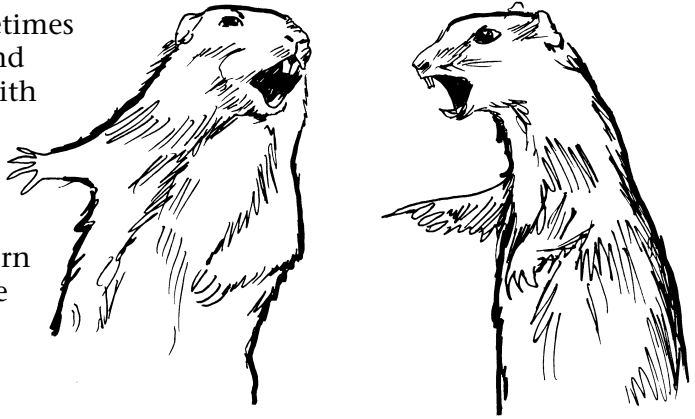
Time to Think

Usually when you are upset and arguing with another person, you do not want to stop and think about these things. But before you can begin solving problems with your loved ones, you have to be able to sit down quietly and calmly and think.

Most of the time you can help to solve difficulties that arise in

your family, but sometimes you are not at fault and have nothing to do with the problem. Even so, you are still affected by it. How can you deal with difficulties that do not concern you directly, but make life more difficult?

Here is how Vince handled his parents' fighting:



My parents would start to fight almost every night. It was awful. They screamed at each other and said horrible things, and acted like my little brother and I were not even there. Tony, my brother, and I came up with a plan. We would go to our bedroom and put on our headphones. We turned the music up until the fighting stopped. It wasn't a perfect escape, but it helped.

Tara, a sixth grader, told us how she kept herself from reacting immediately:

It sounds really stupid, but my teacher told me to try to count slowly to ten when I was really angry at home. She understood that even if you are usually a quiet person, problems at home will bring out your temper. Counting to ten helps me to cool down a little.

Communicating with Your Parents: Problem Solving

The Case of Doing Homework

- ⑥ **What is the problem?** The problem is that Shakeisha's mom wants her to do her homework as soon as she gets home from school. Shakeisha wants to watch TV and then do her homework.
- ⑥ **Who is involved?** Shakeisha and her mom.
- ⑥ **How do you think the other person may feel?** Mom probably feels worried about the homework, and thinks that Shakeisha needs to concentrate more on her studies in order to be a successful. The mom wants her to have more opportunities in the future. Shakeisha probably is not thinking that far into the future, and would like just to

watch a few programs on TV before doing homework.

- ☹ **How are you a part of the problem?** Neither one of them is thinking of a solution that both will accept. Can you think of a possible solution?
- ☹ **Can you do anything to help solve the problem?** Mom can allow Shakeisha a certain amount of time to watch TV. She may watch TV, but either before or after that, she must do homework. Mom can help with or check the work when she is finished. Shakeisha can help by cooperating with the mom to find a solution, and obeying her mom's final decision.

You Can Stop the Bad Cycle

At times, troubles in the family can seem so large and unmanageable that you might feel hopeless. No matter what your situation is with your family, even if other people are totally out of control, you can still control one person: yourself. Cycles of emotional and physical abuse tend to continue through many generations of people until one strong-minded person is able to say, "STOP!" Other patterns which may continue for generations in a family are: poverty, lack of education, sexual abuse, alcoholism, drug abuse and other types of addiction.

When a family member, or several family members, are stuck in a bad cycle, no one benefits. You can be the one to put the brakes on bad relationships.

Michelle, a young woman with two children now, recalls her childhood...

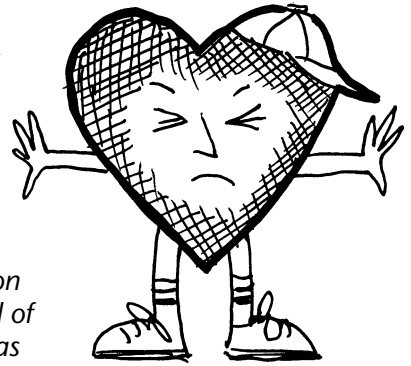
My mom abused my older sister and me since my father left, when I was eight and Dana was eleven. No matter what I did it was never good enough. Mom would come home from work, walk in the door and scream my name. Chills would always run down my spine, even though it happened every day. Michelle, this house stinks, didn't you clean like I told you to? Or, Michelle, the front walk is covered with leaves, are you too good to rake? I felt so guilty. I believed my mom and that all of our family problems were because of my sister and me. She told me it was my fault, that I brought out the worst in her.

Sometimes when she was angry she would attack me almost immediately. She would hit my head, my back, my legs. She hit the sides of my head. I think she was afraid to leave bruises on me. The funny thing is, I did keep the house clean. I cooked dinner almost every night, too. I was

only 14 when I started doing most of the cooking. I did everything for my mom.

My sister was older, and bigger than I was. She got a boyfriend in high school, and he would come home with her. He knew what was going on. My sister started to fight back, and not come home at night. My mom stopped hitting her. All of it was on me then. It didn't help that I have always been very small. I'm still just five feet tall. My mom was tall and much bigger.

My mom told me every day that I was the worst daughter in the world, that she was cursed to have me. She told me that if I told anyone she would kill me. One day I was changing from gym and my best friend, whom I hid everything from, noticed the bruises all over my legs. After school while we were waiting for a ride she asked me about it. I lied, of course. Then she told me that she thought something was really wrong at my house. She could feel it. I was scared to death that she would tell someone. Two days later her mom came to pick us up after school. Her mom talked to me for a long time, and I knew that she understood everything. I agreed to see a social services person with her, I was terrified though. I was also afraid of getting my mother in trouble. I loved her. She was my mother. I felt like I had to be loyal to my family, no matter what. I felt like jello inside for days... That was the beginning of the end of my abuse.



Social services contacted my mother, I don't know exactly what they said, but the physical abuse stopped. I moved in with my dad. He had some problems too, but nothing compared to my mother! She still screamed at me all of the time, but I was used to it. She never hit me again, or said anything about killing me after that. It was a huge relief in my life, a turning point. Now I have my own family, and I am incredibly careful not to treat my children the way I was treated. I love my children more than anything in the world, I can't imagine abusing them like my mom did to me. When I was young I promised myself that if I was ever a mother I would love my children and raise them totally differently than I was raised.

Michelle's friend, and her friend's mother, knew that Michelle was being abused because they saw the signs. Her friend's mother also knew that it was serious enough to call for public service

intervention. Michelle refused to allow the cycle to continue in her own family. If you have ever been abused, the time to speak up and seek help is *now*. Find a person that you trust, someone you feel has good judgment, and tell them. *If that person, for some reason, does not help you, find someone else to talk to. Don't give up, keep talking until someone responds.*

Every community has a Child Protective Services agency. A teacher or a trusted adult can help you to contact them if you have a hard time finding the right phone number. Often, the people who will know how to help you are teachers and youth ministers. In most states, teachers are obligated by law to contact the correct people to help a child they seriously suspect is being abused. *Help is out there.* You just have to be brave enough to take the first step. There are professionals who dedicate their lives to helping children who are in abusive situations. They understand. There is no reason to be ashamed. There is no reason to feel guilty. You are not responsible for being abused. But you can act quickly and stop the cycle. This is best for everyone involved.

Understanding What You Are Loyal To: Dealing with Difficult Situations

Sometimes life is tough. Sometimes you may have to make a hard decision. If your best friend is getting into serious trouble—taking drugs, making themselves throw up after eating (bulimia nervosa) or some other life-threatening behavior—you may have to seek help. You may be doing just what your friend needs and at the same time just what he does not want you to do. By speaking up, however, you are acting as a true friend.

If you tell a parent, a teacher or some other person you trust about your friend, you are, in the long run, acting in the best interest of your friend. Such situations are very hard to manage. It takes a great deal of courage to speak up when you are afraid of how your friends or your loved ones might react.

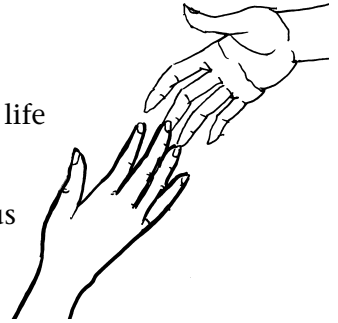
Another sticky situation some children are faced with is physical and sexual abuse from a parent, an older sibling, or another adult they know. If you or a friend is being abused, the right thing to do is to get help. Once again, this is difficult to do because you are afraid to report someone you love or because your life is being threatened.

When you are in doubt about such situations, it is best to find an adult whom you feel comfortable with, someone you can talk

to, and someone who will help you. You do not have to face such difficulties alone. It is important to understand that in such cases you are doing the best thing when you act loyally to a higher value: Life.

Being Your Best

People have realized for thousands of years that life is tough. We have good news, though. You, and no one else, can decide how you will respond to your experiences in life. Many of the world's most famous and beloved leaders, writers, athletes and scholars are people from humble and troubled backgrounds. Here are a few classic examples:



- ☉ **Fredrick Douglass** was a slave. He never knew his biological parents. He was severely beaten, several times almost to the point of death. In spite of this, he secretly learned how to read and write, and eventually became free. He wrote a book about his life, and he worked for the freedom of other slaves.
- ☉ **Abraham Lincoln** lost 38 political elections before he finally became the President. He suffered a nervous breakdown before he was 30 years old. He signed the Emancipation Proclamation that made slaves free.
- ☉ **Helen Keller** became blind and deaf due to an early childhood disease. In spite of this, she learned how to speak, read Braille, and communicate in other languages. She graduated from a women's college, and spent her life helping the blind and the handicapped. She received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, amongst other awards in recognition of all she had overcome and given to others.

There are two kinds of people: those who learn and grow from their pain and troubles; and those who are crushed by their pain and troubles. People who always complain, feel beaten and cheated by the troubles they experience often get stuck in a rut. People who are successful become stronger and wiser as they deal with troubles—they learn many valuable lessons in the school of hard knocks. They usually become much better people because they understand what it feels like to suffer and they don't want to

cause other people to suffer the way they did. When you overcome difficulties, you may find that you are stronger and more creative than you ever imagined. You may discover new aspects of your character that you never even knew existed.

When you have a hard time at home, sometimes a close friend or an older brother or sister can help in ways a parent normally would. To have someone to help pull you up when things are rough can be a lifesaver.

Journal

It takes courage to be your best in spite of difficulties but many people who come from seemingly impossible situations become great people who help others. Can you think of any difficulty you had to deal with that made you better in some way in the end?

To Do

1. In pairs, try to think of other problems children have to deal with in their families that are not mentioned. Choose one of the items and discuss it with your partner. How would you handle this difficulty?
2. In a group, make a list of suggestions for children who live in difficult family situations. These suggestions should help the children be their best self in spite of the problems.
3. Add to the list of examples of people who have overcome great problems to later make great contributions to others. Can you think of any more recent examples? Remember, they do not have to be world famous.

Key Points

- ☞ Many people from difficult families have overcome the problems to realize their own goodness.
- ☞ Many times you can manage to make things better in your home by the way you treat others and work out problems.
- ☞ Sometimes you will learn new and valuable lessons through your struggles.

Back at Home

Back at home, the snow engulfs our house like an inundation of joy surrounding a newborn child.

Back at home, the dogs in the neighborhood yelp all night like demons chained into bondage and crying for freedom.

Back at home, the still, chilled midday air resonates with the cackle of crows, and the sweet song of sparrows making nests in towering naked birch trees.

Back at home, the forest dominates our lives. Indoors is just a bland lie. The great outdoors beckon us into reality.

Back at home, the cat's lair in the stove room is out of bounds to the masses, but my brother is allowed.

Back at home, time is but a child's play thing: the sun rises and sets at random in a constantly overcast sky.

Jason Laurita, 15

