

Parenting to Break the Cycle - of Abuse, Addiction or Dysfunction

by Rebecca A. Stanwyck, LCSW

July 2011

Many of my patients are adult children of alcoholics or addicts, or had parents who were unavailable, self-absorbed or unsupportive for some reason (like mental illness). As children, they may have experienced neglect, abandonment, chaotic or traumatic situations, and physical, verbal or emotional abuse from their parents or caregivers. As a result they may have grown up feeling alienated, distrustful and insecure.

We humans are biologically programmed to love and nurture our children, so this comes naturally for most people - however, addictions, mental illness and other factors can interfere with these natural instincts. When we've experienced behaviors and attitudes from our parents or caregivers which are *not* loving or nurturing, we may consciously or unconsciously re-enact those harmful patterns with others, including our own children.

Yet I've seen many people who grew up in a dysfunctional family break that cycle, and become very good parents. The first step to breaking the cycle is *awareness* - having the awareness that there's something wrong with the way you were raised or treated as a child. Some people have this awareness during their childhood or teen years, but others may not realize it until they're adults and have left the dysfunctional family environment.

The next step to breaking the cycle is to *heal your psychological or emotional wounds* (and address your own addictions, if you have them) - whether by seeking psychotherapy, joining a support group like Adult Children of Alcoholics, or finding some way to "re-parent" yourself. You will then be able to put into perspective what happened to you, understand that it was not your fault, and know that you are worthy of being loved.

Then you must learn about healthy child development and the elements of good parenting. Take a class, read a book (see my recommended reading list, next page), and notice how different a *positive parenting* approach - which emphasizes respect for the child, firm yet loving limit-setting, and the teaching of self-efficacy - may be from your own experience.

And finally, make a conscious commitment to becoming the best parent you can be, and ask your partner or spouse to do the same. *This means being willing to seek help*. Parenting is a physically, mentally and emotionally demanding job, which may trigger painful memories and emotions. Therefore it is essential that you, as the adult child of a dysfunctional parent, make taking care of yourself a priority. You will likely need the guidance of professionals, or of those who have come from healthier families, to help you establish clear and healthy boundaries for you and your child, and to remind you to have compassion for yourself.

If you're already a parent and you haven't done these things, don't despair! You can begin today to make changes in yourself, and learn new attitudes and behaviors. Contact me if you'd like to learn more about parenting and breaking the cycle of dysfunction, at:

Parenting to Break the Cycle - Recommended Reading

Here are some of my favorite books on parenting, which emphasize nurturing your child, treating children with respect, and establishing healthy boundaries:

[A Mind at a Time: America's Top Learning Expert Shows How Every Child Can Succeed](#) by [Mel Levine](#)
(Paperback - Jan 7, 2003)

[How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk](#) by [Adele Faber](#) and [Elaine Mazlish](#)
(Paperback - Oct 1, 1999)

[Magic Trees of the Mind : How to Nurture Your Child's Intelligence, Creativity, and Healthy Emotions from Birth Through Adolescence](#) by Marian Diamond and Janet Hopson (Paperback - Jan 1, 1999)

[Parenting From the Inside Out](#) by Daniel Siegel and [Mary Hartzell](#) (Paperback - Apr 22, 2004)

[Parents, Teens and Boundaries: How to Draw the Line](#) by [Jane Bluestein](#) (Paperback - Dec 1, 1993)

[Positive Discipline](#) by [Jane Nelsen](#) (Paperback - May 30, 2006)

[Positive Discipline A-Z: 1001 Solutions to Everyday Parenting Problems \(Positive Discipline Library\)](#) by Jane Nelsen Ed.D., [Lynn Lott](#) and [H. Stephen Glenn](#) (Paperback - Mar 27, 2007)

[Positive Discipline for Parenting in Recovery: A Guide to Help Recovering Parents](#) by Jane Nelsen Ed.D., Riki Intner and [Lynn Lott](#) (Paperback - Sep 27, 1995)

[Raising a Daughter: Parents and the Awakening of a Healthy Woman](#) by [Jeanne Elium](#) and Don Elium (Paperback - Jan 13, 2003)

[Raising a Son: Parents and the Making of a Healthy Man](#) by [Don Elium](#) and [Jeanne Elium](#) (Paperback - Nov 1, 2004)

[Raising Your Spirited Child Rev Ed: A Guide for Parents Whose Child Is More Intense, Sensitive, Perceptive, Persistent, and Energetic](#) by [Mary Sheedy Kurcinka](#) (Paperback - Nov 28, 2006)

[Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live Too](#) by [Adele Faber](#) and Elaine Mazlish (Paperback - Dec 14, 2004)

[The Winning Family: Increasing Self-Esteem in Your Children and Yourself](#) by Dr. Louise Hart and Kristen Caven (Paperback - Nov 1, 1995)

[Uncommon Sense for Parents with Teenagers](#) by [Michael Riera](#) (Paperback - Oct 1, 2004)

[Unconditional Parenting: Moving from Rewards and Punishments to Love and Reason](#) by [Alfie Kohn](#)
(Paperback - Mar 28, 2006)