

PATHWAYS

My daughter is hopefully in her last months of speech therapy. It wasn't until she was seven that I began to look vigorously into getting her help. Her articulation issues did nothing to impede her use of her vocal cords and her confidence level has rarely been an issue. But let's face it: Cindy Brady was only cute for a season. The irony was that because of my delay, she qualified for services through the public schools. If she had been tested any younger than 7, her issues wouldn't have been classified as severe enough to qualify for services and I would've had to pay \$100 a pop. Three cheers for denial and procrastination!

Three years later, we are on our third speech therapist. It took almost an entire school year to get through the red tape and begin therapy. Each school year, Harley has been assigned a new therapist that comes to her school each week. They've all been good, but our latest one has drill-sergeant tendencies in a peppy, blonde package. She's assigns daily homework that consists of repeating certain sounds in certain ways, often 50 times at one sitting. That might not sound like a lot, but each item added to my children's to-do lists somehow seems to involve me. Multiply each task by three kids and add in my part-time job, and

even the smallest task can push me over the edge. But I respond to matter-of-fact authority figures and honestly, her therapist scares me a little in her enthusiasm.

“You don’t want her to sound babyish, do you?!”

“No.” I reply with serious, submissive eye contact.

“You’d do whatever it took if your child was relearning how to walk! Wouldn’t you?!”

“Of course!” *Adding an intentional nodding motion to my serious, submissive eye contact.*

“Well, talking is just as important! You’ve gotta do whatever it takes. Do you promise to commit to the program?”

“Yes, ma’am!” I reply as I fall to the ground and give her 10 just for good measure.

It can be so hard to fit the homework into our busy schedule. We’ve had weeks where I have to stick a tongue depressor against the side of Harley’s tongue so she can push against it and build up strength. You can’t do that while driving! But the seed was planted that I’m a bad mother if I let my child continue to lisp so speech exercises have become one task I remember.

There is a method to her madness, and I am hearing progress. Her therapist explained that the point of repetitive sound exercises is to retrain the brain to make sounds in a new way. By repeating a correctly formed “r” sound over and over, new pathways are eventually formed in the brain to replace the old, faulty method. The key is strengthening the tongue muscles, correcting tongue placement, and repeating until the pathway takes hold. It’s a process, and it takes time.

Interestingly, during the years Harley has been in speech therapy, I’ve been undergoing intensive relearning too. My husband’s job-related travel has escalated to the point that he’s gone most weekdays. I’ve had to adjust to being a single mom during the week while also working Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays during the school year.

I am genetically predisposed to desire a reaction of horror mixed with sympathy when recounting the trials and tribulations of my day, week, life, etc. In my family, the person with the hardest circumstances wins the “You poor dear!” award and garners the most attention. As my weekdays became more hectic, I found myself keeping tabs on all my daily hardships so I could get the best bang for my buck when describing them to my friends and neighbors. But God continued to turn up the heat to the point that I didn’t have the desire or energy to tell anyone about the day—or night—before.

One particularly bad episode happened during the grueling routine of football season. I was picking up my son in the dark from football practice. I'd had such a hard day and was already in my pajamas. (Yes, I drove to pick him up in my pajamas. You gotta a problem with that?!) Putting on pajamas at 5 p.m. is the maternal form of waving the white flag of surrender. If you see a grown woman in pjs before dusk just know she's one step away from the fetal position. In my I-give-up attire, I drove to get Alden. Fortunately, my kids have been trained to know to come to the car to avoid having the public see their mother in lounge wear. As he got in, I began the evening debriefing.

“We’ve got lots to do once we get home. I need you to stay on task.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I mean it. It’s almost 8:00 so you have to eat, shower, and do homework. You have to stay on task. I’ve had a hard day, and I really just need to get in bed. Okay?”

“Okay.”

We pulled into the garage and I called out to him as he ran inside, “Remember, stay on task!!!” I went in and began to heat up some dinner as I waited to hear the shower go on. Instead of water running I was greeted with a frustrated cry. I grumpily ignored it until it got too loud.

“What’s wrong?” No response. “Are you staying on task? I’ve told you we’ve got to get you in the bed as quickly as possible.”

Finally, he appeared . . . in handcuffs! “They won’t come off.”

“How is that staying on task?!” I screamed. “Where’s the key?”

“I dunno. They’re stuck.”

“What? Let me try.” They were his brother’s toy handcuffs, but they really were stuck! This couldn’t be happening? And then he started to cry because he’d put them on too tightly. He managed to get one hand out, but one cuff was on his wrist with its mate dangling like a tacky bracelet. I tried a paper clip, any possible key we could find, but had no luck getting the cuff to open. I did the only thing I could think to do, I wailed. I out-cried him. The stress and anger overtook me and I began to sob uncontrollably.

After our joint tear-fest, I finally gave up. I got back out of my pajamas and drove all three kids to the neighborhood fire station. The lights were low and the place was all locked up. They were probably back watching “Must-See-TV” as they waited for an emergency. And here we were! We tried the main door but got no response. We found a window that looked into the small room with surveillance monitors that showed the outside of the building. Tapping on that window, we caught the attention of a fireman. He opened the front door and without tears, I tried to explain our predicament. With the help of another

firefighter, several tools were tried. I was afraid we were headed for the Jaws of Life, but a huge lock cutter that lives on the truck finally was able to cut through those blasted toy handcuffs. We thanked them profusely and returned home emotionally beaten to a pulp. I didn't even bother to say, "Stay on task" as the kids bounded inside so amused by their nighttime adventure.

It took me weeks to even be able to tell anyone that incident happened because I was so raw from fatigue and frustration. It didn't help when my oldest son found the missing key a couple weeks later. Out of sheer survival, my energy now goes towards enduring the ups and downs of each day with little regard to a future public reaction. If God only gives us as much as we can handle, my hard days seem to be more between Him and me.

What I've realized as I've been softened (or broken) is that God is forming new pathways in my thinking. I have a new appreciation that a good night's sleep makes most problems seem more manageable. I know his mercies really are new every morning! I've become better at rolling with the punches. I can't pinpoint any one moment that changed me, but I know that God is using my daily circumstances to create new pathways in my brain.

My husband recently decided that he too is sick of his traveling lifestyle. Completely on his own, he chose to pursue a new position. Just last week, he took a job with a local business. Tonight when his plane lands, he will be

officially done with his consulting-related travel. Since ten days after our wedding—when he reported to his Army post in Germany and then to Desert Storm for six months—much of our marriage has involved long periods of separation. Perhaps it’s taken me this long to form the pathways needed to appreciate his presence without just seeing him as my rescuer? Turning to God for my daily challenges has finally become my first response. Forming new pathways is awkward and often painful, but the end result gets us one step closer to being the person God intends for us to be.

