

To Intervene or Not to Intervene
Marshall Shelley, Christianity Today

A pastor encountered one of life's little dramas playing itself out as he entered the YMCA: A toddler wearing a wet bathing suit was coming out the door from the swimming pool area, and her mother was saying, "You are such a coward!"

The child was shivering, and her cheeks were wet—from tears or the pool? The pastor couldn't tell. She simply stood there shaking as her mother continued, "It's the same every week. You always make your daddy and me ashamed. Sometimes I can't believe you're my daughter."

The pastor found himself thinking, I wonder what the penalty is for hitting a woman?

"What she was doing was more hurtful, more brutal than a beating," he reflected. "It was emotional child abuse, and if it continues, that toddler will grow up feeling worthless, which will lead to all kinds of destructive behavior."

Most people feel the urge to do something, either immediately or eventually, to help the mother realize what's at stake, to help her be a better parent. Even if she isn't asking for help.

When is intervention appropriate? How do you enter a situation uninvited? It's not an easy decision.

Tips for Interveners

Confront with tears.

In any confrontation, the tendency is for the person being confronted to say, "You don't understand. You don't know what I've gone through." Graciousness, tenderness, and empathy are important even when you have to be firm.

A psychologist told me a long time ago, "When you have to confront, be sure to share how you feel — not just with your words but with your body language, your facial features, your tears. Let them know this isn't easy." It was good advice. People are much more open if they don't feel you enjoy correcting them."

Confront with strength, not authority.

There's a difference between intervening from a position of strength and a position of authority. Authority means coming down with an imposed order and saying, "You need to stop this because the [police, management, the other people around you] disapproves."

Intervening from the position of strength is to point out strongly the natural consequences of the present course. "If this keeps up, here's what's going to happen." And perhaps "Some of those things have happened to me, and they hurt like the blazes. Do you really want to do this?"

Very few times will a person turn around by being told he is doing something evil or unacceptable. More often change will happen when a person is confronted with what's in his best interest — "Have you considered this consequence?"

Affirming the Importance of Life

Surprisingly, people tend to underestimate the value of their own lives. One of the duties of a pastor, especially when dealing with those destroying themselves but refusing help, is to remind people of the importance of life — their own included.

When it comes to helping those who don't want help, sometimes they, too, need to realize their own significance. God himself is interested in their decisions.

At times this can be done with indirect confrontation; at other times, however, it requires direct intervention.