

A Good Pair of Walking Shoes

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by Heidi Thomas

Every day, my friend and I enjoyed each other's company as we walked to and from our children's bus stop. We liked to think we could solve the whole world's problems between sips of coffee and occasional tugs from our kids. We had built a comfortable relationship that neighbors grow into over the years.

Finally, our kids were at the same school and riding the same bus. It was fun for both of us. We looked forward to our daily Monday through Friday morning routine. God used that routine of walking together -- and my training in peacemaking -- as an opportunity to tell my friend about Him.

Breaking through the Superficial

Not long into the school year, we broke through surface pleasantries and started to ask each other personal questions. Jenni (name changed) was a young mother of two energetic boys. They kept her hopping, so she was always tired. She was a working mom who worked full-time outside of her home. In the meantime, her husband was carrying a heavy load at his office. I, too, work outside the home while my kids are at school. I am the secretary at an active church. I think this was a curious position to Jenni, as she was always asking questions about what I did.

Their family doesn't attend church. I had also started a conciliation course to help me learn how to handle conflicts better. I didn't tell Jenni much about this course, but she knew I was nervous about going back to learning mode after so many years. She heard me use the word "peacemaker" a lot.

Having been raised in the same town we were living in, I never did much traveling. My husband joked with me before we were married. He said, "Honey, if you ever want to live any place else, we better not marry 'cause I'm not moving." Needless to say, I succumbed to the love of my life and ended up staying right where I started out. While my studies about peacemaking took me out of my comfort zones as a wife, mom and church secretary, they also took me on airplanes to places far away from my home.

Confiding a Conflict

It was exciting to share stories of my trips with Jenni. It gave us chatty women even more to talk about. Once Jenni asked if she could tell me about a problem she was having with one of her son's teachers. I could tell by her tone she was angry and was going to share with me a bad report about this teacher. Before I responded, I asked Jenni if she had tried to talk this over with the teacher first. She said, "No, not really." I

then explained that if I were to listen, it would be gossiping since I wasn't part of the problem or the solution at that point and I knew the teacher pretty well. I encouraged her to try to talk to the teacher.

The next day I saw Jenni and asked her how it went with her son's teacher. She said it was awful, even worse than she could have imagined. She thought they would never be able to talk again and the teacher was going to take it out on her son. I gently asked Jenni what she thought the conflict was all about. She explained that the teacher had sent home a letter about how Jenni's son had been disruptive in class. The teacher said it was affecting the learning environment for other students. Jenni responded that she thought the class was too big for the teacher.

I realized we were in the midst of a conflict and I was being asked to put my training into practice. I encouraged Jenni to try to find something in the conflict that she could take responsibility for. What had she done to contribute to the conflict? She admitted to trying to hurt the teacher's feelings with her response letter. She also knew the class size had nothing to do with the conflict and that her son had been misbehaving at home as well as in class. She admitted that she might have overreacted to the teacher's initial letter.

Taking Responsibility for Your Role in Conflict

I asked Jenni if she thought she could admit all this to the teacher. I actually role-played with her concerning how she could approach the teacher to apologize. Then we thought through some creative solutions to this problem and what she could suggest, in a calm way, if she had the opportunity, to this teacher. I explained that from my years as a school volunteer the teachers seldom got this kind of support from parents and that it might shock the teacher that Jenni was actually apologizing.

I suggested the team approach. Both Jenni and the teacher wanted what was best for this child, and they needed to feel they were on the same team to accomplish this goal. It took a lot of courage for Jenni to approach that teacher a second time. But, this time she had been trained how to approach a conflict in a different way. She knew there were no guarantees to the teacher's reaction. Her goal was just to try to make things right from her perspective.

Jenni went back to the teacher and apologized. She took full responsibility for the part she had played in the conflict. The teacher was so taken aback she had to sit down. She responded in kind by telling Jenni that she hadn't given her enough information in the initial letter and should have tried to make contact in person. She explained how emotions can get mixed up in written words. They both agreed on an approach to help Jenni's son at school and at home. They decided to work as a team for the sake of this precious child.

Biblical Application

I was also able to share with Jenni that all the things we walked through that week were biblically based principles I had learned from my training. She was able to examine herself and the part she had played in the conflict. I told her that God cared enough about her as a person to write about it in the Bible for her to read as well. She, too, could learn from God's principles for daily living. It took her by surprise. She didn't know all that "Bible stuff," but she knew that whatever it was, it worked.

I continue to pray for opportunities to walk with Jenni. We walk and talk. Sometimes we talk about God. Sometimes we're quiet. I know God gave me the opportunity to talk to Jenni as we walked through that conflict in her life. Sometimes, all God needs are willing neighbors to ask the right questions at the right time -- with a good pair of walking shoes.

Heidi Thomas lives just outside Atlanta, GA and serves as Vice President and Director of Operations for [Proskuneo Ministries](#). She is passionate about unity in the body of Christ and leadership development. You can contact her by e-mail at info@proskuneo.info.