

Conflict Example: Breaking the Cycle

Jill

Have you given any thought for travel plans after Christmas this year?

Ben

Not really, but I guess we should probably figure that out pretty soon. I think my parents are traveling out to my grandparents house again this year. I know that 4 hours each way might be a bit much for the baby in a day, but I think we can do it if we stay overnight for a day or two. We'll have to plan ahead and get off work. Maybe the 26th - 28th?

Jill

[Furrows brow]

Hmm. I'm not sure that's a good idea. They have that new dog; he's had some significant behavioral issues. I'm not sure our kids would be safe in that environment, and I'm not sure your grandmother would ever speak to me again if she saw what I did to the dog if he attacked one of the kids!

Ben

[Furrows brow also, tone sharpens]

It's been two years since we've seen them! I really think we need to get out there. There will be lots of people around, so lots of eyes to watch the dog and the kids. You're totally overreacting here. Are we just never going to see them again because they got a new dog?

Jill

Yeah, there's lots of people, but none of them are watching the kids. They'll be too busy "reveling" to be paying too much attention, and most of them think getting the dog stirred up is funny. It's a totally unsafe environment for the kids.

[NARRATOR PAUSE]

Do you see how quickly this has escalated to a crucial conversation?

1. Opinions differ
2. Emotions are strong (*you caught the non-verbals*)

3. The stakes are high (*we haven't seen family in two years...vs. Kids safety at stake*)

Jill

And besides, you never seem to care that overly much about getting to see *my* family around the holidays.

Ben

Half your family barely celebrates Christmas! What a bunch of Scrooges! I just don't understand what's so difficult about spending a few days with them. We barely get to see them twice a year!

Jill

[Beginning to withdraw]

Fine. You figure it out and do whatever you want. Just let me know when and where I need to be. I'm sure since you are the one that wants to do this you'll do *all* the packing and getting the kids ready too.

Ben

What are you trying to say? You know I'm extra busy with work around the holidays and just don't have the time to help with that sort of thing before it's time to go.

Jill

You're busy?! (Exasperated gesture) I have a job too, PLUS all the holiday baking, PLUS ordering gifts for everyone including your family, and now I'm packing for a trip too?!?! All you do is your job. You just don't manage your time well!

[NARRATOR PAUSE]

So what has happened here?

1. Safety has been lost, all dialog has stopped
 - a. Nothing being said is adding to a pool of shared information. Notice how they're not even talking about the relevant issue anymore.
 - b. Instead they've traded healthy dialog for heated verbal jabs.
 - i. It's now about winning rather than solving the problem at hand.
 - ii. And, we're not even talking about the original topic anymore!
 - c. Remember, withdrawal or attacks are a sign that safety has been lost. So, will they continue escalating or will they bring the conversation back to healthy dialog?

Back to Ben and Jill...

Ben

[Sighs, less emotional]

I'm sorry. This wasn't the direction I wanted this conversation to go. I love you, and you love me, and we don't want to hurt each other. We're on the same team here.

Jill

You're right—I'm sorry too. I don't want to make it seem like I don't care about your family or don't want to see them. I do, and I do want to be able to have time with them and make sure the kids are safe and having a good time too.

Ben

Ok. Let's try this again. Can we figure out a way that we'll get to spend time with my family under circumstances everyone will enjoy?

Jill

What if we stay with my mom and go visit your grandparents for a day when they have the big get-together? She's only a couple of hours away from them, so it could make sense to do it in a combined trip. I'm sure your grandparents' dog will be contained when everyone is there and all of your cousins' kids are there too.

Ben

Oh! That's not a bad idea...

[NARRATOR PAUSE]

So what happened there?

The cycle of escalation was broken, by:

1. A genuine apology
 - a. A statement for diffusing anger "I love you and you love me, and we don't want to hurt each other..."
2. A contrasting statement
 - a. "I don't want to _____, I do want to _____"
3. They figured out a new solution that was a win for everyone.