**The Origin-Story Project for Parents**

**-Inspired by Counselor Adam Young’s Storytelling Framework-**  
[**www.adamyoungcounseling.com**](http://www.adamyoungcounseling.com)

This project is designed to seed the start of a storytelling culture in your church, particularly among parents. So, why storytelling?

Pastor and Counselor Adam Young points to our “origin story” experiences of growing up—the challenges we experience in our relationship with our parents—as deeply affecting our ability to “attach” to others and to God. He says that when we practice telling aspects of our story of origin—our growing-up years—God moves to unblock our relational pathways. When this happens, the horizontal relationship parents have with their kids will grow and deepen, as their vertical relationship with God grows and deepens. This, in turn, has a saturating impact on parents’ ability to influence their kids’ faith growth.

If we expand our imagination, church can become the place where people are sharing their family of origin stories in groups. Look for natural opportunities to have small groups, triads, or partners try this storytelling experience. For example, tie it to a seasonal focus and ask them to try this experiment for a month—during Lent, at the start of a new year, over summer, as part of a Fall kickoff emphasis, or during Advent. You can also add this experiment into a “regular” gathering experience that includes parents—a Wednesday night meal/community/Bible study time, for example. Or as part of a parent-focused Sunday school class.

So, how can we give parents simple, safe, and “normal” ways to share parts of their story of origin in genuine ways? This Origin-Story Project for Parents is designed around four steps:

**Step #1 – Leaders Go First** - To create a church culture where people feel free to share their family-of-origin stories with one another, we must start with the leaders. Leaders who begin to share the small vignettes of their growing-up story in public and private normalize this practice for everyone in the congregation.

Begin by inviting the leaders to be curious about their own stories. Have a group of your leaders first test this strategy before you invite selected groups in the church to try it. Use the story-sharing guidelines for “Pairs In Small Groups” below in a leadership or staff meeting, and then strategize ways that leaders can share *snippets* of their story during the worship service and other public congregational settings (the sermon, announcements, “testimony” time, ministry gatherings, and so on). These stories can also be captured on video and shown, instead of a live presentation.

As leaders move toward practicing story-sharing together, and before the congregation, then the focus can expand to include a story-sharing experiment with parents in the church…

**Step #2 – Pairs Within Groups –** Staffers who have a working knowledge of existing small groups or other small gatherings in the church can target groups with active parents in them. Ask those groups to set aside one group gathering for this Origin-Story Project. Give the leader(s) of each group these instructions, and ask them to report back to you on the experience after they’ve tried it…

**Origin-Story Project – Getting Started:**

• Remember, as you lead people into this micro-story-sharing experience, our experience points to people being more willing to do what you’re asking them to do than you expect. If you approach people as if they will do this, they will…

• Form pairs, making sure couples are paired with others, not each other.

• Give each person paper and a pen. Have them take 10 minutes to individually identify **one** significant childhood experience that is still impacting their life today. Ask them to decide how they would tell this small story to someone else, then write out that story as best they can. Here is a prompt that will help them do this…

• Prompt – Finish this sentence: **“One childhood experience that is still impacting my life today is…”**

• After 10 minutes, say:

-**Now I’d like you to share your story with your partner. You get to decide at what level of vulnerability you’d like to share—any level is fine. You can share your story on more of a surface level, or you can go a little deeper. It’s up to you.**

**-You’ll have 10 minutes for this, with each of you taking 5 minutes to tell your story and engage it with your partner. Partners, as you listen to your partner’s story, you can simply respond with: “Tell me more.”**

**-At the 5-minute mark I’ll check in on pairs to remind you to switch storytellers. At the 10-minute mark I’ll break-in to your conversation and ask you to end your time in prayer…**

• After 10 minutes, gather back together as a whole group and ask these questions:

- **What was that experience like for you? What emotions did it bring up for you, and why?**

**- If you shared about a challenge you faced in your childhood, how do you think that experience is impacting your relationships with others today? your relationship with God?**

**Step #3 – Going Deeper –** The goal is to set in motion a story-sharing practice that can incrementally move deeper for parents in your church. For small groups that would like to experiment with the “next level” of story-sharing, ask them to set aside another regular gathering for a second experience.

• Form new pairs, making sure couples are paired with others, not each other.

• Give each person paper and a pen. Have them take 10 minutes to individually identify one difficult, challenging, or wounding aspect of their childhood relationship with their parents that is still impacting their life today. Ask them to decide how they would tell this story to someone else, then write out that story as best they can.

• After 10 minutes, say: **Just as we did the first time, now share your story with your partner. Remember, you get to decide at what level of vulnerability you’d like to share—any level is fine. If you can share past the surface level, great! You have permission to go a little deeper, or stay in your comfort zone—it’s up to you.**

**-You’ll have 10 minutes for this, with each of you taking 5 minutes to tell your story and engage it with your partner. Partners, as you listen to your partner’s story, you can simply respond with: “Tell me more.”**

**-At the 5-minute mark I’ll check in on pairs to remind you to switch storytellers. At the 10-minute mark I’ll break-in to your conversation and ask you to end your time in prayer…**

• After 10 minutes, gather back together as a whole group and ask these questions:

- **What was that experience like for you? What emotions did it bring up for you, and why?**

**- How is this experience with your parents impacting your relationships with others today? your relationship with God?**

**Step #4 – Going Still Deeper –** If you’d like to take your group into the next step of this process, going still deeper, here is a way to do that. First, read the “How to Help People Tell Their Story” handout ahead of time. Then, at your gathering, give each person a copy of the “General Guidelines for Writing Your Story” handout. Give them five minutes to read through the guidelines. Then ask:

- What do you resonate with in these guidelines, and why?

- What is hard or confusing about these guidelines, and why?

- What seems do-able, and what doesn’t seem do-able to you? Explain.

• Form new pairs, making sure couples are paired with others, not each other.

• Give each person paper and a pen. Have them take 10 minutes to individually identify one difficult, challenging, or wounding aspect of their childhood relationship with their parents that is still impacting their life today—something they haven’t yet shared. Ask them to decide how they would tell this story to someone else, then write out that story as best they can.

• After 10 minutes, say: **Just as we’ve done before, now share your story with your partner. Remember, you get to decide at what level of vulnerability you’d like to share. Because of our previous two experiences, this might be a good time to risk a little. But you’re in control of your own vulnerability, so you decide how far outside your comfort zone you’d like to go. We honor whatever decision you make.**

**-You’ll have a bit longer for this—15 minutes total, with each of you taking 7 minutes to tell your story and engage it with your partner. Partners, as you listen to your partner’s story, remember and refer to the guidelines in the “How to Help People Tell Their Story” handout. And you can always simply respond with: “Tell me more.”**

**-At the 7-minute mark I’ll check in on your pairs to remind you to switch storytellers. At the 14-minute mark I’ll break-in to your conversation and ask you to end your time in prayer…**

• After 15 minutes, gather back together as a whole group and ask these questions:

- **What was that experience like for you? What emotions did it bring up for you, and why?**

**- How is this experience with your parents impacting your relationships with others today? your relationship with God?**

**How to Help People Tell Their Story**

**Our goal is simply this: *The church needs to become a community where people share their stories with one another.*** For this to happen, the church must communicate a cultural norm for why engaging your own story is both biblical and wise.

• Let’s be clear about what we mean by our “stories.” We’re not talking about a 30,000-foot version of a person’s story, where they stay comfortably removed from the painful details. The invitation to story work is an invitation to name with specificity the ways that people have been harmed by their parents growing up. In order for a person to name the harm they’ve experienced, they have to engage ***the particularity of their story*.**

• Actually, it’s **the particularity of their stories (plural)**… because people have many of them. Do they have a story? Yes, but it is far truer to say that **they have stories.** By telling their specific, individual stories of heartache and harm, they’ll come to understand how their brain has been shaped by their family of origin.

• This process begins by inviting people to write out facets of their story—to focus on certain aspects of their story in “bite-able” chunks. That means writing out a story of harm that involves your mother or father. And writing those stories **on the ground level**—with details.

**General Guidelines for Writing & Listening to Stories**

These are guidelines that will help you to write your story, and listen to the stories of others… Engaging another person’s story is part art, part science – it can be learned. And we can “catch” how to do this by watching other people do it, and by simply practicing and learning from our experience. These guidelines are adapted from counselor Adam Young’s work on writing your story, and listening well to another’s story…

1. **Include important details –** It helps to include the details of tone, context, surroundings, and life stage as you write your story. The truth is always reflected in the details, so include them in your story.
2. **It’s important to feel your story** - When we begin to tell a story at the ground level—with details—we begin *to feel the emotions and bodily sensations we felt in the original scene.* The key is to visualize the story and write the details.
3. **It’s important to linger with another’s story** - Please hear the next phrase—we need to *linger* with the feelings of the person who’s telling their story for a while. To linger means to let the big emotions associated with particular scenes in their story rise to the surface. It means to spend time in the moment when they were betrayed by someone who should have protected them and cared for them. It means that you linger with—or sit with—the part of their story when they felt absolute powerlessness, and to notice the sensations that that powerlessness evokes in their body. To linger means to invite people to sit with painful moments in their story and simply FEEL their feelings—which often means feeling deeply uncomfortable emotions—like hopelessness, grief, sorrow, and rage.
4. **Welcome grief when it comes, because grief heals** - If they linger in the details of a particular story—and if they are named well enough in that particular story—then grief will emerge. And grief heals the human heart. Grief integrates neural networks in your brain.
5. **Attuning to the storyteller is more important than engaging their story brilliantly.** This means that the most powerful tool in your toolbox is simply your intentional presence. As you pay “ridiculous attention” to people, thoughtfully and purposefully present to their whole person, not just their words, you “unlock” them. People aren’t used to others paying real attention to them—so prove that you are paying attention with your body language, feedback, and follow-up questions.
6. **Kindness will take you further than skill and giftedness.** As you lean into your encounter with a primary goal of kindness, the storyteller will feel progressively more safe. Kindness communicates safety, prompting more openness as the person sees more and more proof that you have genuine kindness toward them. Remember that kindness is not the same as niceness. People don't need merely a listening ear, they need someone with the courage to risk naming truth in their story that they may not see yet.
7. **Use the exquisite instrument that is your body.** Your body language communicates everything. Are you using your body to communicate compassion, openness, attention, and invitation? It’s soft eye contact, facial expressions, head nods, leaning in, and conveying emotions that prove you understand and honor the impact of their story on the person.
8. **Always monitor the storyteller’s affect—from numb and shut down all the way up to panic, rage, or terror.** What are you learning about the person from how you are experiencing their emotional presence? How are their emotional responses, or continuing affect, at odds with their words? What words would you choose to describe the person’s whole “vibe” as they tell their story—and what can you learn about them from understanding that vibe?
9. **Your right brain matters way more than your left brain when you’re engaging someone’s story.** You have two brains—they do very different things. The words you speak to the storyteller come from your Left Brain. Your tone of voice and facial expression comes from your Right Brain. Verbal vs. Non-Verbal communication. The storyteller is more interested in your non-verbal communication than your words. What are you communicating with your face and your tone? So, why is this true? Non-verbal communication is non-voluntary and unedited—you can’t hide how you really feel about what you’re hearing, so the storyteller processes that as more true than your words.
10. **There’s always a reason for human behavior.** Whenever there are characters in someone’s story, these are human beings with intentionality. They are creators of purpose and will. Any time a person is in someone’s story they’re acting with agency. Suppose the storyteller believes that the meaning of his story is that his Dad neglected him—almost always not a sufficient explanation. The question: Why did my dad not pay attention to me, when he did pay attention to my sister? Our task is to make an incoherent narrative more coherent. To make a confusing story more understandable.
11. **Repairing rupture is more important than engaging their story perfectly.** There will be times when you miss the storyteller. People go to places you don’t expect. It’s not a big deal as long as it’s repaired. It means to acknowledge that you missed them, or stopped tracking with them. Admit your misstep—frequently check in with the storyteller to surface what they’re feeling or experiencing internally. When you lose the track of the story, will you go back to recover it? We are afraid of saying the wrong thing, or saying something hurtful—but we are allowed to screw this up. We don’t keep the prospect of pursuing someone imperfectly to keep us from pursuing. Just repair anything you need to repair.

**Bonus:**

If you’d like to experience counselor Adam Young delving deeper into the role of attachment and storytelling in our relationships with others, and with God, here are two links to two MasterClass sessions he led as part of Vibrant Faith’s 2022 MasterClass season…

**Session 1** – <https://vimeo.com/757265463?share=copy>

**Session 2** - <https://vimeo.com/759611952?share=copy>