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BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

Chapter 11

The CONTAINER in POWER and CONTROL “NEVER THE RIGHT SIZE!!”

THE CONTAINER -- BOUNDARIES AND LIMITS

*All my life, I've been listening... and waiting. I was never the right size... one day I was too big... another day I was too little. But now is the time finally. All my life, you have been telling me that someday I was going to grow up and have to make... **get** to make my own decisions. So here I am ready to make my own decisions. And I decide to... stop taking piano lessons... spend \$70 on a Princess Beanie Baby... drop Algebra... watch another half-hour of television... buy that top... hang out with Charlie... eat only organic food... get a second pierce in each of my ears, and maybe one in my nose... **What!?** I can't!? What do you mean.... I can't? You said... you said I could make my own decisions! You said I could when I grow up! **You lied to me!** Make my own decisions!?! Make my own decisions.... Yeah, right! Make my own decisions... but not **that one!** Not **that way!** Next thing you know, it'll turn out you lied to me about Santa Claus too! ... **What!?***

This giving children power and control thing sounds good. Letting them have choices sounds good. But some of the choices they make! How many pierces do you want!? Where!?! Oh my! We want children to be able to make choices -- **good** choices. Many adults try to give their children more power and control and choices. However, they often still find themselves drawn into power struggles with the children. They know they need to be positively involved as their children develop a sense of power and control in their lives-- that there is a risk of a socially toxic ideal self and real self developing. From research and literature about raising children and from intuition and personal experiences, adults know that children need and want boundaries. However, boundaries are more than what not to do, but also guidance in how to make choices.

BOUNDARIES -- DO'S AND DON'TS VS. SAFETY AND PREDICTABILITY

Ordinarily, when we think of boundaries and limits, we tend to think of what children and people cannot and should not do. This is the "no", the "don't", the "stop it." There are many things that children should not touch, should not do, and need to stop (sometimes immediately because of imminent danger). However, is important to remember that the setting of boundaries is not only what should not be done, but also implicitly (ideally, expressed more explicitly) that behaving and acting within these boundaries assure the child, safety and nurturing, consistency and predictability... and the lack of ambiguity and freedom from arbitrary treatment. From this perspective, setting boundaries and limits is about creating the container within which a child or a person or a community can flourish.

It is within this container of boundaries and limits that the child or the person can be



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freed and should be freed to exercise appropriate power and control -- to make personal choices. Consequently, in a sense (within certain limitations of respect and safety), it almost doesn't matter how strict or how lenient the boundaries are or are not. What matters is that the boundaries are consistent. With consistent boundaries, the container is set clearly, and children and people can function safely within the container of boundaries. When there are inconsistent boundaries, the container is ambiguous and dangerous, and children and people are never sure whether it is safe, permissible, risky, or dangerous to do this or that.

MAKING CHILDREN MAKE THE "RIGHT" CHOICE

Some parents are consistent but in their urgency to make sure that children make the "right" decisions, not only set the container of boundaries and limits but also define exactly what can and cannot be done **within** the container. Parents may encourage, suggest, guide toward, "reason".... intimidate, or threaten children to make the "proper" choice. In other words, any other choice that is not what the parents want becomes the wrong choice.

"Pick whatever you want. Oh, are you sure that's what you want? Isn't this one nice too? I don't think that was as nice. What do you think? Well..... Are you sure? I really like this one. So, that's the one you want? Uh huh.... Well, let's think about it for awhile. We'll come back."

These words are only part of the communication that directs the child to make "appropriate" choice. There's also all the nonverbal communications: the sighs, the frowns, rolling eyes, the nods, various body postures, etc. And, the omissions and the "forgotten" messages. Read between the lines. Children may be young, but they are not stupid! They figure out very quickly what pleases or displeases their parents, and the consequences to pleasing or displeasing them. Parents can go to extreme measures in order to have their child make the "right" choice. And, they can do it in such coercive and subtle ways, that they can maintain to the world and their child (and, especially, to themselves) that their child made a free choice. After which, they can claim that their child does have power and control -- choice, in their lives. If this happens throughout childhood, it can become insidious and emotionally and psychologically damaging. Over and over the child hears that he/she has power and control -- choice in his/her life, yet he/she never feels in control. They may begin to doubt their own sense of reality. The sense of powerlessness and the reality of a lack of control may drive the child into seeking other ways to take power and control. Defying toilet training is but one way -- an early way to assert this need. Eventually, children get toilet trained. However, the sense of powerless and being out of control can become lifelong issues. New techniques and methods are found to assert power and control (including outright rebellion) -- some of which are developmentally defined, and others that are utilized across the ages.

"GOTCHA!! GOTCHA!! GOTCHA!!!"

Power and control is such a fundamental issue that when it is lost from over strict



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boundaries and no choices, that the **illusion of power and control** becomes compellingly attractive. Passive aggressive behavior often becomes the major way people gain a sense of power and control in their lives. Unfortunately, passive aggressive behavior does not gain true power and control. Very few people (especially children) just give up and acquiesce to being overpowered and over controlled. If it is not safe to overtly defy the person or persons who are dominating, people find other ways to gain a sense of power and control.

Does this scenario sound familiar? Kirstie has gotten hold of a permanent marking pen. I need to get it from her before damage is done. "Give me the pen please." "No, I want to draw." Quickly I explain that it is not the kind of pen for kids to draw with, and there are markers that she can use in the desk. "No, but I want it!" Now I demand it and threaten her with consequences, "You better give it to me right now, or you're in big trouble." Now she has to give it to me. Her option to keep the pen -- her power and control has been taken away. But it is too dangerous to defy daddy -- I'm bigger, and meaner! But Kirstie still wants to have power and control. So what do she do? In her little head, she intuitively thinks,

"I have to give it to Daddy. So I give it to him. I will. Yep, I will... but I will do it... slowly! Slowly.... Very slowly.... As slowly as I can! If he tells me to hurry up, I say in outraged self-righteous voice, 'Whaaat?! I'm coming! Can't you wait? What's your hurry?' I delay as much as I can. If he gets upset, all the better -- it's working! He threatens me again. Okay okay... 'I'm coming. Geez, what's the rush?' I imply with my tone and body language that there is something wrong with Daddy for being so impatient. Finally, still going as slowly as I can get away with, I hold the pen out to him... just slightly out of his reach!

I get more and more aggravated -- whoever said patience is a virtue didn't have children! I start to lose it and yell, "Give it to me **now!**" I can't believe that I'm sounding more and more like that ogre I had sworn never to be!

"Here, take it, I say as I keep it slightly out of Daddy's reach."

This kid is making me crazy! How come she can't just put it in my hand? Why do we have to go through all this? "**Put it in my hand!**", I scream, veins popping in my head.

*I move the pen slightly closer to his hand and just as he is about to grab it.... I... I... I drop it on the floor! **Hah!! Yesss!! Yesss!! Gotcha!! Gotcha!! Gotcha!!** Ohhhh! Check out the look on his face! **Gotcha!! Gotcha!! Gotcha!!** If Daddy says 'Why did you drop it?', I respond, 'Whaaat? I didn't do nuthin!' You dropped it. I can't help it if you drop it! Geez!"*

A COSTLY "VICTORY"

Aggravating mom, frustrating Dad, stealing paper clips from office, coming in late to



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work, doing the paperwork (sort of), taking your break... and then using the restroom, rolling your eyes, a sigh, slumped posture in the chair, gossip, and insulting the boss (behind his/her back) are all examples of **passive aggressive behavior**. The common elements to all of these actions are: first, they are all aggressive in seeking to harm the other person, not physically, but emotionally or psychologically; secondly; are overtly nonspecific -- there is not always an obvious overt target (even though, it may be obvious to whom the actions are intended) -- they are indirect; and third, can be claimed to be nonaggressive but still serve to equalize (symbolically) the power and control deficiency. Unfortunately, none of these behaviors establish true power and control -- just an illusion of power and control. And, worst of all, they take the place of behaviors that could potentially gain true power and control in the person's lives.

If passive aggressive behavior becomes the main way (or only way) to gain power and control, then an individual will never learn healthy ways to gain true power and control. He/she "wins," but pays a profound price. As much as the passive aggressive person claims to be not aggressive -- no matter how self-righteous he/she may sound, people soon begin to recognize the attacks for what they are. People soon begin to resent the passive aggressive person and began to covertly and overtly punish the person for their behavior. Passive aggressive people are pain! Kids can become a pain! And, are treated as a pain. This will, of course, cause the passive aggressive person to become even more self-righteous -- feel even more wronged; and experience a greater loss of power and control, and as a consequence lose more self-esteem. These individuals complain bitterly to you about the injustices in their lives. They complain so bitterly and so self-righteously, that you want to pull out the party hats, noisemakers, and blowers to be properly dressed for the pity party! Yet, you have no empathy or sympathy for them because their passive aggressive behavior has been so annoying.

If your child does passive aggressive behavior, you need to recognize is that he/she is trying to get power and control in his/her life. The motivation for power and control is appropriate, but the technique is dysfunctional. This is learned behavior, **after** his/her first overt choices for gaining power and control have been frustrated. And, you are probably somehow intimately involved in the entire process. Children are continually looking at ways to impact the world. Understanding how they sometimes choose to have a negative impact on the world gives us guidance on how to direct them toward having constructive impact on the world. Some of the basic mechanisms of the child's learning process developmentally and the dynamics of "explore and experiment" are important to examine.



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Chapter 12

IMPACT in POWER and CONTROL

"NO...NOPE...UH UH... NO WAY! WHAT?...THAT'S STUPID!"

What do you want for lunch? How about a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?

No, I hate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches!

How about a tuna fish sandwich?

I hate tuna fish! You know I hate tuna fish!

(Maybe **today** you don't like tuna fish) Well, what do you want for lunch?

I don't know.

How about some soup? (Oh heck, here we go..... Again!)

I don't want soup.

You want me to make some macaroni and cheese?

You know I'm sick of macaroni and cheese!

(The pressure is on. Gotta come up with something else. Or else...) Uh.... How about some cheese and crackers?

No!

(Gotta think...) How about some instant noodles?

*You know how much MSG is in those things!? **You trying to kill me!?***

(Oh my. Gotta come up with something else... gotta come up with something else....) how about...? Or...? Maybe....?

*No...Nope...Uh Uh... No Way! What?...That's Stupid! I Hate This! I Hate You! But..... Make me another offer anyway so **I can reject it too!***

I have often watched children and teenagers manipulate adults into trying to satisfy their negativity. Typically, the adults suggest a particular solution or option to the child. And another one, and another one, and another one -- on and on. So.... so that my loving child can reject it too. So that my loving child can spit on it too! Such pressure! Such futility! Where does the vulnerability to this tactic come from? It's as if the child is saying "Please me or else. Please me or else I will reject you. And, since you can't please me, I reject you." Here you see frantic adults trying their hardest to come up with another offer just to be abused over and over. The anger and disdain that comes from the child hits the adult over and over as offer after offer its rejected. Why is he/she being so negative? By can't he/she be positive? By being negative -- by rejecting offer after offer, the child is in control and has power over his/her parent. By saying no once, his/her parent has to come up with another offer to try to please him/her. By say no again, the parent comes back again. By say no again and again, the child able to move the parent emotionally back and forth -- from hope to despair, from calm to anxiety, from love.... to anger and resentment. Power and control! But what a lousy way to get power and control! However, if it was the only way that was available to you and if it was the way that was **taught** to you, then it is **the way** to have impact.

Some children and some adults are highly and overtly aggressive and in a distinctly



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negative fashion. These are children and people who have learned that power and control in their lives comes from being negative. Due to the circumstances of their lives (for children, primarily the families), they have learned that they have no positive means of gaining power and control. The only way they have been able to get any power and control in their lives is from being negative. Such people can become the adults are so critical, and who are always so ready to tell you why something will not work -- and why you are so stupid to even try! They reek of negativity. They are the people that rain on your parade. These other individuals who attack your dreams, stomp on your optimism, and discourage you from trying.... supposedly to be "supportive," "practical," "realistic," or "out of love to keep you from being disappointed." While Eeyore in Winnie the Pooh is very endearing with his gloomy outlook, without his heart of gold he would be very aggravating too. The negative people that we are talking of do not have hearts of gold-but bitter resentful hearts.

EXPLORE AND EXPERIMENT

It can start very innocently. Piaget describes the earliest stage of the child's life as the sensory motor stage. In the sensory motor stage, children experience the world through their senses and their physical interactions with it. They look, they see, they smell, and they feel with every part of their bodies -- including some parts you don't expect! Through this interaction with the world, their brains and their entire beings are developed. The core to the process is exploration and experimentation. Remember when your baby gazed into your face... scanning it over and over with those wide soulful eyes. It seemed as if the baby with trying to find every nook and cranny, every wrinkle, every hair... the essence of you. This is exploration. And when the baby held the rattle, stuck it in his/her mouth, rubbed it on his/her face, and banged it on the crib. This is exploration. And then

"I throw the rattle out of the crib. Someone picks it up and puts it back in the crib. That's daddy's face. Smile. Hi daddy. That was interesting. And I throw the rattle out of the crib again. He picks it up again and puts back in the crib again. Smile. Hi daddy. Hmmm? Interesting. And I throw it out again. Here it comes back again... and again... and again, because this is really interesting, so I do throw it again... and again... and again! Hey, I just learned something about the world. I just found out a way to have some power and control in my world as little as I am. I've learned that..... I throw and daddy fetches! Good daddy! I think I saw daddy do this with a stick and the doggie. Good doggie! Cool!"

This is experimentation. If these kinds of experiments are reinforced appropriately, then children learn how to have impact on the world in either positive or negative ways. How does something so innocent (and familiar) evolve into something as negative as the "what is for lunch" battle? The child is experiencing that he/she has impact. The degree and quality of impact will vary depending on the developmental level of the child, experience, and skills... and on their parents' skills. In other words, you can affect is learned from these experiments.



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BLOCKS... CRASH! -- IMPACT ON THE WORLD

Do you remember when your baby was too small to stack blocks up but delighted in knocking down the blocks you had set up? Developmentally he/she was unable to do things, make things, build or create things. In a sense, he/she was unable to exercise creative energy like a more adept older child. However, every child wishes to have impact -- to have power and control in his/her world. Unable to have positive impact -- to have creative impact, many children choose to have impact on the world anyway. They may choose to have negative impact -- destructive impact on the world in lieu of the positive creative impact they can achieve with greater maturity. Stack the blocks, Mommy. I can't do that. But I can knock those blocks down! And spill the bowl! And scare the cat!.... Graffiti the wall! Put down the idea! Discourage the visionary! Little kids often delight in destroying things, but this does not mean that they will turn into negative or sociopathic teenagers and adults. People normally prefer to have positive impact -- to be constructive rather than destructive. Only if they can not have constructive impact do people normally turn to destructive assertions of worth and power and control. Prisoners are faced with such a dilemma. In prison, if they behave -- i.e. are positive, they are ignored. In being ignored there's no confirmation of their basic worth or even of their basic existence. On the other hand, if they misbehave (are destructive), they are punished -- sometimes quite severely. So what do they do? The need to have a sense of worth -- to have power and control in the world is so profound that prisoners will misbehave (and get punished) in order to draw confirmation of their existence. Adults often hypothesize that the underlying source for a child's acting out behavior is a need for attention. Ironically, after making this correct assessment, adults respond by ignoring the child! Ignoring the child continues to confirm the child as not counting and not having worth. This tends to drive the child either into more severe acting out or into intense anger or depression.

How often do you set up opportunities for your child to have a sense of power and control? To have choices? How often do you help your children recognize when they have exercised power and control -- that they have made choices? It may be as simple as saying, "Look, you knocked down all those blocks!" or, "You put all the blocks in the basket!" In other words, from your actions and your decisions, you have had impact on the world. It is normal for very young children to have physical challenges (fine motor and gross motor) in creating and making constructive impact on the world. This is the underlying issue in developmentally appropriate practices in a child's and a person's development (as it is applied not only to physical challenges but also to cognitive, social, emotional, and psychological challenges and task). Developmentally appropriate practices assert that people can function successfully within a range of functioning/skills according to their natural maturation. Asking or pushing children to function outside of their developmentally appropriate stages risks overwhelming stress and harm to Self-Esteem. For example, expecting a three-year-old to read fluently, a two-year old to be toilet trained, most eight-year-olds to stop their play and put themselves to bed at 7 p.m., most 10 year olds to understand that the principle of being a good friend includes



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sometimes not going along with your friend, many adolescents that respect also means giving respect even if you feel disrespected, and so forth may be outside the developmental ability of the person. Unfortunately, many adults ask children inadvertently to function at higher levels of developmental ability than is realistic. When this happens, children experience a lot of stress and a lot of failure. If the failure continues and accumulates, children may turn to negative ways to experience success.

FINGER PAINT FIRST... POT?... HARVARD LATER

As simplistic as it sounds, this is why you give children finger paint before you give them pencils; large paper without lines before coloring books; scooters before tricycles before a bike with training wheels before a bike without training wheels; have been do chores like putting their clothes in the hamper before folding their clothes before washing their clothes; cook Eggo waffles before frying scrambled eggs before planning and cooking Sunday dinner; choose what T-shirt to wear before choosing between soccer and baseball before choosing biology or physics before choosing Stanford or Harvard!; choosing how to be a good friend, before choosing what a good friend needs to be to you before choosing whether or not to smoke the pot or drink the beer your friend offers. As your children finger paint, scoot along, put their clothes in the hamper, heat the waffles, and so forth... and you give feedback that the finger paint picture is wonderful, the scooting is fast, good job with the clothes, the waffles are delicious,... that it was a good choice about your friend and so forth, success and confirmation direct your children toward affirmative and constructive creative ways to have impact on their world.

As you direct your children, however are you also frustrating your child's attempts at power and control (What? More complications? Why can't it just be simple? Because it isn't! If it were simple, you wouldn't be reading this!)? One way to frustrate your child is to make sure he/she makes the "right" choice. If you truly wish to give your child the experience of making choices, then you also need to give him/her the experience and consequences of making **poor choices**! Can you stand letting your child make poor choices and suffering the consequences? Lions and tigers and bears and poor choices..oh my! Let children take the consequences of good **and** poor choices as learning experiences.



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Chapter 13

CONSEQUENCES in POWER and CONTROL “THAT’S NOT FAIR!”

Can I have it? Uh huh.... Okay... I know... Uh huh, I know I won't have any money left. Can I have it? Please... please... pretty please.... I won't ask for anything else. I'll be good. Please, I don't care that I won't have anything later. I won't ask. Please... (Okay, I'll get for you.) Thank you thank you thank you! I won't ask you for anything else... ever. I'll be so good. I don't care about anything else. I won't ask for anything ever ever again. You won't be sorry! Thank you thank you thank you! (Okay. I set the limits, I offered the choices, and I made clear the consequences. That's how to parent!)

On to next week. Ooooh! It's so neat! Kim has one. I want it. Buy it for me....(No.) What?! (You spent all your money last week at the fair.) Last week? At the fair? But I want one! I need one! **Everyone has one! I'll be good. Please... please... pretty please.... I won't ask for anything else. I'll clean my room. I'll practice my piano. Please. I have to have one. Please, I'll be good.... No!? Kim's mom always gets her things. Ben's dad buys him stuff. That's not fair! Please!? I'll be the **only** kid who doesn't have one.... **I HATE you! I hate you!** You **never** get me anything! You **always** get things for Johnny! That's not fair! You like Johnny better! **I hate you! I hate you!**..... (Oh no! Here they come.... tears, sulking, the silent treatment, screaming, tantrums.... a multitude of possible combinations to punish me. My baby hates me! My baby wants to trade me in for a new parent! Oh, the pain! How could I be so mean? My baby hates me! People are looking at me... how embarrassing! They must think I'm a monster! It's just money. What is the big deal? Well.... just this time.)*

Thank you! Thank you! You're the best mommy (or daddy) ever! Thank you thank you thank you! I won't ask you for anything else ever. I'll be so good. I don't care about anything else. I won't ask for anything ever ever again. You won't be sorry! Thank you thank you thank you!

As you enjoy the glow of appreciation and relish in your child's joy, a little voice says, "Won't be sorry, huh? Yeah, right! If this is so great, how come you feel that you just sold your soul?" And that there will be a time (many times) you will pay the price. Your kid just made a bad choice and you just made a worse one.

POSITIVE CHOICE --> POSITIVE CONSEQUENCE; NEGATIVE CHOICE --> NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCE

Children need to experience the consequences of their choices. If they make a positive choice, then experiencing positive consequences will help them learn positive principles of life. However, it is when we make poor choices and suffer negative consequences, that we usually learn the most. If we prevent children from making poor choices, we actually block them from profound learning experiences. Of course, there are some poor



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choices that we want to preclude. However, it is said that a wise person learns from the mistakes of others; the average person learns from his/her own; and the fool does not learn despite continued mistakes. The wisdom that we seek to give our children usually comes from our mistakes -- mistakes that we made while ignoring wisdom being offered to us!

When there is a mismatch between verbal and nonverbal communication, the nonverbal is trusted; and the verbal is dismissed as a lie or a deception. Parents might warn their children not to spend all the money or else they won't get something else later. However, since most children are focused on the here and now, they will often choose what is exciting right now. Later on when there isn't enough money, they would be so sad.... so pathetic.... so whiny! Many parents cannot endure this and feel compelled to save them, and give them money to buy the new toy. Unfortunately, then the negative choice of spending all their money results in **no negative consequence**. Parents might say "Didn't I tell you?," and otherwise verbally point out the negative consequence (blah blah blah). If they pay for the toy anyway, the nonverbal communication (the action) is deemed to be the true communication. Arguably, **the negative choice still results in positive consequences** -- they got a toy before and another one now! (And the parents are little more broke!).

BEANIE BABIES BUDGETING

For the longest time, it seemed that my kids spelled both mom and dad, "ATM!" We'd want to please them and buy them things. However, when we didn't, then too easily we became the bad guys. As much as we gave them guidance about what was appropriate and inappropriate spending, they were children. What is essential and what is desired -- it's all the same to them! Parents often spend far too much to keep children happy (actually to maintain their self-images as wonderful giving parents). As a consequence, children begin to feel a sense of entitlement. My wife and I decided to put our girls on a monthly budget for not only fun things but for their essentials as well: their clothes (\$30 jeans! \$20 tops! \$130 shoes!), cosmetics, music CD's, etc.... in other words, just about everything except medical, athletic, and school needs.

They each got a \$100 a month budget (more or less depending on your specific situation). We couldn't and didn't anticipate everything, so we had to make some adjustments along the way. They could spend the budget in almost any way they wanted, but would get nothing more if they ran out of money (younger kids -- shorter time period? more limitations?). Any unspent money would be credited to the next month's budget. However, they could not borrow against next month's budget! (Don't want to start that credit card mentality already!!) Want to go to a movie? Check your budget. Need a present for a birthday party? Check your budget. Like that ring? Check your budget. Need a new winter jacket? Check... and manage your budget... for the next three months! We kept a record so that we always knew how much... or how little money they had in their budgets. They could ask for the money as needed or have it deducted from their account as we bought things for them.



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BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

We warned both of them to be careful with the money and not to spend it all early in the month. They **said** they understood. The first week, they both bought some clothes for school. The next weekend, Kirstie saw the cutest Beanie Babies! Three cute Beanie Babies! Three cute **retired** Beanie Babies! We warned her that buying them would wipe out her budget for the entire month. Against our recommendations... despite us trying to get her to make the **right** choice, Kirstie bought the Beanie Babies. And despite the potential negative consequences, we let her. Kirstie was delighted with her Beanie Babies... for one and half weeks. Then she realized that Friday would be the first middle school dance... the first ever for her. And it cost four dollars. She asked us for the money. We told her "Check your budget." Her eyes grew wide, "But I don't have any money left!" We'd replied, "Oh well." We did not have to be angry at Kirstie. Since the budget plan was a self regulating process, whatever decisions Kirstie made would naturally bring consequences-- both positive and negative. We were disappointed rather than angry. **Our anger would have distracted her** from making the connection between her choice and the consequences. Anger would have focused her on us (Mommy and Daddy being mad at her and/or what meanies we were!) rather than the consequences. We wanted her to experience both success with good choices **and** disappointment with bad choices.

LEARNING OPPORTUNITY VS. PUNISHMENT OPPORTUNITY

The consequence was staring Kirstie in the face from a choice that she had been counseled against. Should we let Kirstie experience the consequences of a poor decision, or save her and probably defeat the entire learning process. Up until this point, all our parental advice about future consequences was only half heard. The most important issue here was that Kirstie learn and understand the principles about making good decisions -- not a specific commandment to do this or to do that. . This was a **learning opportunity** as opposed to a **punishment opportunity**. We decided to let her borrow money against the next month's budget as a one time only exception because she was learning the budget and the budget rules. However, she would never be allowed to borrow against the next month budget again. This was not a threat -- it was a certainty! Avoid threatening children; a threat is a manipulation to make a child do something. Make a promise of consequences that will happen. We were, admittedly, taking a chance that she would learn from this break, rather than just take advantage of it.

Often times when you explain something to children, it seems that they do understand. However, the full implications are often beyond them-- often beyond their experiences. We were not interested in punishing Kirstie for not understanding completely. We were willing for her to take the consequences once she had a real chance to understand. Sometimes it is impossible for a person to understand until **after** they have had the experiences (remember, only the wise learn from other people's mistakes!). We could have let her miss the dance (and be meanie parents!). However, the lesson about choices and future consequences, not going to the dance or not, was the issue. So we sent her off to enjoy the dance with her friends... and hoped that the lesson was learned. If it wasn't



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learned... oh my! Some people can learn when consequences are staring them in the face. Others when consequences hit them in the face! For some, only after being hit several times! And, unfortunately, some never learn.

A couple of weeks afterwards, she said she needed a new outfit for the school's winter concert. We told her to manage her budget over the next three months to make sure that she would have enough money. No extra money from us -- she had used up all her slack. Initially upset, she eventually accepted this and began to make financial plans. She was very pleased about the outfit she ended up with -- and even more pleased that she still had money afterwards! We were all fortunate that Kirstie only had to face but not experience negative consequences in order to learn. It would have broken our hearts to see her suffer, but we would have allowed it. There have been other times when we did. Those times are never easy, but they are critical to helping developing an appropriate sense of power and control and high Self-Esteem.

Negative choices and negative consequences... as parents, we need to let them happen. The easy part is in making sure that children get positive consequences for making positive choices. Rewarding children and doing things that please them (even spoil them.... a little!) fulfills us as loving parents. However, it is also the hard parts that make up good parenting. One of the most difficult things to do as a parent is to deal with children's negativity. The next chapter will look at how a parent handled her child's negativity and turned it into a constructive life lesson.



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Chapter 14

NEGATIVITY in POWER and CONTROL MAKE ME AN OFFER I CAN'T REFUSE!

Mom? Uh.... I've been doing all my chores and I'm doing well at school. Uh... Can I go to a concert with Barbara, Patti, and Janet on Saturday? Barbara's mom said she'd drive us, if it's okay with you. It's from 2 to 6 p.m. Can I go, please? I haven't gone out in a long time.

I have birthday money and some baby sitting money for my ticket. Barbara's, Patti's, and Janet's parents already said they could go. I need to tell Barbara tomorrow so her Mom can buy the tickets. Where? At the Coliseum. Who? Uh... the... a band. Can I go? Please, please, I'll be good. You know Barbara and Patti and Janet... they're even more goody goody than me! You can trust me-- us.

Too late to get good seats? No... they have stadium seating... we can sit anywhere we want. We can even move up closer during the concert. You kinda have to push and shove, but that's part of the fun! Can I go? Please...

*Who's the band? Uh...ummm... the... Beastie Boys. Can I go? Please? (**What!? The Beastie Boys!!!**)*

INSTINCT, TRUST, BETRAYAL, RESPECT -- BUT... THE BEASTIE BOYS!

You said that she could make choices when she was older. And, you did say that you trusted her. But... the **Beastie Boys!** Her daughter was 15 and physically mature (with the curves of a young woman! Oh my!) wanted to go to a Beastie Boys concert! Oh my! Mom was caught in a dilemma. She wanted to respect her daughter's need to be a more independent teenager. On the other hand, as Mom she was terrified! If she said no (which all her instincts said.... after all, this wasn't Sesame Street Live.... it was the Beastie Boys! the... **Beastie... Boys!**), she knew her daughter would feel that she didn't trust her. She did trust her daughter, it was everybody and everything else that she didn't trust! For years she had been telling her daughter that she needed to be responsible and make decisions. It felt hypocritical to say then say, "But... but... not **that** decision!" While some parents feel that they did not have to explain themselves, she had always felt that explaining things was respectful. She did not want to betray this or betray being the kind of mother she wanted to be.

But, if she said yes, her daughter would be at a Beastie Boys concert! With three friends and 12,000 strangers! With stadium seating! (Stadium seating is no assigned seating. Your child would be one among 12,000. Even if you wanted to find him/her, it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.... a haystack of Beastie Boys, oh my!). She knew her daughter had no intention of doing anything inappropriate. She was going with friends -- good responsible friends. Saying no would imply all the responsibility



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speeches and the promises of greater independence and trust for 15 years were but a bunch of elaborate lies. The last thing she wanted to do was to betray her daughter. She desperately wanted to be able to say yes to her daughter. But... the **Beastie Boys!**

YES, BUT...

I counseled her how to say yes in a particular manner. She told her daughter, "I know that you really want to go to the concert. I also trust you and your friends to be responsible. I've raised you to be independent and to make good choices. So, the answer is 'yes.' However, I cannot just stop being your mother and worrying about you." Her daughter interrupted, "Oh Mom, you don't need to worry about me." When she insisted that she couldn't stop worrying, her daughter snapped, "That's your problem. Just don't worry."

Mom was ready for this and responded strongly, "Even though it scares me, I'm trying hard to let you be the teenager you need to be by being willing to let you go. Don't you tell me not to be the mother that I am! Being your mother means that I care for you and love you.... And I worry about you. **Don't you tell me that I can't be the mother that I am, especially when I'm trying to let you be the teenager that you are!**" The mother told me later, that her daughter was quite shocked -- but positively. Being allowed to be who she needed to be also meant allowing her mother to be who **she** needed to be. Asserting power and control also means giving appropriate power and control. Reciprocal social responsibility -- what an amazing concept!

MAKE ME AN OFFER I CAN'T REFUSE!

Mom continued, "The answer is 'yes', you can go.... if you can make me an offer, so that I can feel comfortable enough to let you go." "Oh mom, you don't have to worry!" "I told you already, worrying is what mothers do. Don't tell me I can't be your mother. The answer is 'yes'. Make me an offer that works for me."

Her daughter was perplexed. She was used to being negative and having her parents make offers until **she** was satisfied. Now, she had to come up with the offer! "Why should I have to satisfy you?" Mom responded, "Okay, if you don't want to come up with something, then the answer changes to 'no'. If you can't come up with something, you can't go. If you can, then you can."

Her daughter held out a little longer, "I don't see why I have to do this because you worry." "I can't stop worrying anymore than you can stop being a teenager. So the answer is still 'yes', if you want. Make me an offer."

The key was that Mom was very clear that she was both willing to let her daughter go and willing to not let her go. Many parents sabotage this entire process by being unwilling for the child to choose a "bad" consequence. As they protect the child from "suffering" the consequence, they undermine themselves. They teach children that their parents will give in if they threaten their parents by choosing to suffer! -- sounds crazy, but the



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craziest thing, is that it often works!

FROM A NEGATIVE PROCESS TO AN AFFIRMATIVE PROCESS

Faced with her mother's firm stance, her daughter began to make offers. Since this is a real story about a real mother and a real teenager, you should know that her offers were pretty lousy! She was very experienced and expert at being negative but had little practice in offering something affirmative. Her first offers were actually negative offers. "If you let me go, I won't nag you anymore." "I'll stop fighting with my little brother..." Surprised? Being negative, intimidating that she would become negative, offering to stop being negative was what she knew. We had discussed this beforehand, so Mom simply said, "That doesn't work for me."

"But why not?" With this challenge, the daughter was inviting the mother into an argument -- a replication of the hundreds of previous fruitless arguments. She didn't bite. Mom reiterated, "No, that doesn't work for me. Make me another offer." This really threw her daughter off. Arguing she knew, negotiating and making offers were new.

"Okay, I promise to be good... to stay in one place... not to drink or do drugs...to stay with my friends. How's that?" Kids often (adults too) will promise anything at times to get what they want. Also, a promise is not a tangible offer. Mom said that she still would worry. At this, her daughter played the outrage-hurt-betrayed card,

"What!? You saying you don't trust me!?" This accusation is a trap --that not trusting the daughter was the ultimate betrayal. And, to avoid this, the mother would have to let her go. However, the mother was prepared for this trap. "I already said that I trusted you. It is everybody and everything else that I don't trust. Besides, I asked you to make me an offer so that I don't have to worry as much. Make an offer."

It took the daughter several attempts to think of something that worked for Mom. The power dynamic had been shifted significantly. Instead of Mom frantically searching for a way to satisfy her, her daughter now had to come up with an offer. More importantly, the young woman gained power and control through an affirmative rather than a negative process. Mom held fast to the principles, and after quite a bit of discussion, the daughter finally came up with something workable. She got to go to the concert, but she was to bring a cellular phone and four times during the concert at prearranged times call to let her mother know that she was safe (not drunk, beaten up, etc.). In reality there are few perfect solutions. However, Mom was allowed to be a mother (and to worry) and her daughter to be a teenager (and to be independent), and for their relationship to mature. True power and control was obtained not through negativity but through creative mutually respectful affirmative strategies.

Not all parents would come to this solution -- many parents would feel that 15 is too young to go to a concert (especially a Beastie Boys Concert!) regardless. Boundaries vary from family to family. The principles here are much more important. Whenever



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the actual decision, learning that power and control should be gained with responsibility to others' needs is critical to the healthy development of self-esteem. Parents who continually restrict and restrain their children, inadvertently take away children's sense of power and control, leading to rebellion and defiance. On the other hand, when children are respected and given choice, they are more willing to accept the boundaries. How children can come to accept parental decisions and "magic pills" will be discussed next.



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Chapter 15

MAGIC vs. REALITY and RESULTS in POWER and CONTROL "TAKE ONE CHILD... MIX IN..."

*Why does it have to be so hard? I read **all** the books and magazines. I went to **all** the classes. I talked to the doctors and teachers. I knew what my parents did well and not so well. The world is changing and I'm changing with it.*

I read to the baby and played the right music... even before my baby was born! Just Sesame Street and the Discovery Channel. Of course, no guns. We gave the boys dolls and let them know that nurturing was masculine. We let the girls climb and play sports and let them know that being powerful was feminine. We picked the house, the neighborhood, and the schools for them.

What else am I supposed to do? Can't it be easier? All this, and still.... Phonics or whole language, "academic" or developmental, pacifiers or thumbs or nothing, schedule or demand feeding, T-ball or soccer, overnights? naps? dating? And the questions and demands! They weren't in the books! "Where do babies come from?" "But Jody has two moms," "Can I...?", "Why?" "Why do people have to die?" "How come Charlie's dad hits Charlie's mom?" "I don't like how Uncle Bobby gives hugs." "Why did that man shoot those kids?"

*The books and videos don't tell you. Your parents do tell you....well, that's another story! And then again, **there's always SOMEONE telling you!** Take one child.... mix in this or that theory or philosophy... add this or that technique... stir and bake for one childhood, and **ta da!**... take out an intelligent, healthy, moral adult! But it's **not** that easy! What's the secret... the magic formula?*

THE MAGIC DIET PLAN

This or that self appointed expert (who me!?) always will present to you the magic plan -- the perfect prescription on how to raise the perfect child. There are often sound research and logical theories in these prescriptions. However, like all prescriptions or diet plans there is always the unspoken component. The basic diet plan is take in less calories or the right calories (eat less or eat the right food) and burn more calories (exercise more)... with vegetable or meat and egg... cabbage soup!.. the "eat anything you want" (yeah, right!) version... tofu versions, nonfat, low-fat, and high-fat versions, and so forth. However, there is always a third component to a diet. **Stay on the stupid diet!** Duhh! Why don't people stay on their diets? Will power? Or, something much more complex? The complex issues of body image, cultural and gender norms, distinctions between nourishing and nurturing, nutrition, body chemistry, body type, and especially, emotional and psychological issues (including depression and self-esteem) can make staying on any diet overwhelming. Oh my! Looking for another diet is easier! And for many people, much less dangerous than examining why their body or weight is so important to their



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sense of worth. In the same way, some parents are continually looking for another magical parenting plan rather than examining their core sense of ability and worth as parents -- as human beings.

MAGIC PILLS AND MAGIC WANDS

On the other hand, sometimes something "new" seems to work like magic. Often, the "magic" comes from a clarity of logic. For example, children tend to be willing to accept control and discipline when they feel that their needs too are respected. Parents need to be sure to allow the opportunities for appropriate power and control. Vegetables have to be eaten, but the choice given to the children is whether or not they want carrots or broccoli. While chores may be mandated, children may choose whether to do them before or after dinner. Applying these kinds of principles does not mean that everything will work out magically. Sometimes a choice is followed by "forgetting" to take out the garbage. Then parents must follow-through on consequences set earlier. Your ability to follow-through with reasonable consequences on a consistent basis will be put to a test. Consistency has a magic of its own.

However, there are **no magic techniques...** period. Anyone who claims they have one is over simplifying the wonderful complexity of children and parenting. I often show my counseling clients my magic wands and magic pills. I wave the magic wands at them or I offer them a selection of magic pills (actually Jelly Bellies) and ask them to take a red one for anger, a blue one for depression, and so forth. Afterwards, I ask them "Is everything okay now?" At this point, they wonder if I'm the one who needs help! The magic wand and the magic pills don't work... and, the crystal ball on my desk can't tell them their future either! However, we can figure out what made them who they are and created their relationships and dynamics. And with this understanding, we can figure out how to improve things. The same is true of interacting with and disciplining children -- no magic pills or magic wands. However, who they are and your relationships and dynamics are logical, which when well understood lead to growth and change. There is no magic, but when you are clear, it is almost magical how readily you can come to appropriate parenting decisions.

SHALL SHE DANCE? -- HOLDING ON AND LETTING GO

Last year, our high school freshman asked if she could go to a dance. She had already gone to several dances -- a couple of high school dances and a couple of church youth group sponsored dances. She always went with friends that we knew, and either we or their parents drove. There were implicit and explicit expectations about behavior and responsibilities: staying on the site, calling for a ride, and obviously, no drinking alcohol and so forth. There were some minor misunderstandings, but nothing unexpected when a more independent relationship between teenager and parents is developing. She had made good choices and enjoyed her new independence as a teenager.

We could not really know what was going on when she was at the dances. It **was** uncomfortable to give up control. However, making good choices cannot be only talked



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about, it must be allowed to be experienced. We sent her off with a smile, gritted our teeth and held our breaths! When I came to pick her up, I was always relieved to see her safe and sound where we had agreed for her to be. It was like when she took her first faltering steps as an eleven month-old child. Should I let go? Is she ready? Will she fall? Will she be hurt? Should I hold on? I'm was afraid then too. I held my breath then as well, but I did let go because I knew she could not learn how to walk on her own if I held on. The questioning of how much to hold on, of the need to let go, of that agony of letting go repeats itself over and over throughout your child's upbringing. It's amazing that I ever get enough oxygen into my lungs as many times as I have held my breath... and will hold my breath!

This particular dance, however, was a high school **and** college age dance sponsored by a very reputable community organization. She said that several her friends were going (actually, several of her friends **wanted** to go -- not the same thing!). It was an easy decision -- not just a fear based decision. It was one thing for her to go to dances with her friends (who we knew, liked, and trusted) with other high school students, but it was another thing altogether to allow her to go to a dance with college age kids -- in other words, with young men and women up to their mid-twenties. We explained to her our reasons for not letting her go. It was not about whether or not we trusted her; it was about not trusting the circumstances. Of course, she was disappointed. However, she accepted it -- and accepted it fairly graciously (how's that for magical!). She accepted our asserting power and control about this dance (and perhaps, begrudgingly accepted our logic), because she had been given so much power and control in choosing to attend other dances.

Being denied this dance was acceptable to her (as much as any teenager can accept being restricted!), and we as parents felt that we had been appropriately responsible, respectful, responsive, and consistent in setting boundaries. At times, the relationship between us as parents and teenager feels magical. This magic, however, didn't come from luck -- it came from study, practice, risk-taking, and work. It came from earlier times when, we said to a three-year-old, "You want ice cream? If you eat dinner, you may have ice cream for dessert. If not... then not". And, a three-year-old who sometimes didn't get her ice cream.

Significance, Moral Virtue, and Power and Control in are essential to the healthy development of self-esteem in a child. However, each person also needs to feel that they are successful -- competent in the areas of their lives that they feel are important to them. This would be Coopersmith's fourth area of self-esteem -- Competence. We need to build the sense of competence in our children as we develop the self-esteem of our children.