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BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

Chapter 16

COMPETENCE- WHO'S OKAY? WHO'S NOT OKAY?

*Owww! Ahhhhh! Hurts! Mommy! Daddy! Hold me, hug me... Mmmm... Mmmm... still hurts... scared... scared...Owww! **What!?** I'm okay!? Did you **really** say, "You're okay" to me just right now?" Look at my face! Owww! Ahhhhh! Don't tell me that red mark is no big deal! Hurts... hurts bad! Look at that wet stuff -- those are tears. Owww! Ahhhhh! Are you stupid or something? You are the grown up -- I'm the kid. Can't you tell how I feel? I'm okay!? I'm okay.... No way I'm okay! Don't tell me I can't... Ahhhhh!... be me. Don't deny me what's real to me. Owww! Ahhhhh! **Owww! Ahhhhh!***

The last few months we had been discussing self-esteem using the concepts from Coopersmith. Self-esteem is made up of four parts: first, significance -- the messages of worth and caring from the people significant in the person's life; second, moral virtue -- the internalized values that a person acquires and how well he/she lives up to them; third, power and control -- the degree to which an individual has choice and influence over his/her life; and fourth, competence -- the subject of this month's article. A child in order to have self-esteem that is powerful and stable also needs to have a sense of competence.

OKAY!?

Parents intuitively understand that children want to do things well. How often have we watched children struggle to make something work? They frown, grit their teeth, and grunt. But if we ask if we can help or reach in to show them where that puzzle piece goes, often they pull away and snap, "No, self!" And, when your child is disappointed, we want so badly -- need so badly to reassure them. The frustration seems to be so painful, that we feel obligated to make it go away. So we reassure them, "It's okay honey. You can do that next time." Or, "But you are very good at the other puzzles." Another time when you ask what is the matter, he/she replies, "I wanted to be the line leader for recess. But they chose Johnny instead." Almost immediately, you might say, "That's okay." While definitely well intended, this type of comment misses the mark in a couple ways.

Saying "that's okay" inadvertently devalues the pain that the child is going through. It implies that he/she shouldn't be upset -- that they should be able to set it all aside quickly, and just be okay. This fundamentally disrespects him/her. Many times parents say, "that's okay" because they want their children to be okay. A father was sitting on the floor with his son who was about seven months old. The little boy was prone to tipping over still. He tipped over and banged his head, **WHAM!!** There was a moment of silence with the initial shock. Quickly it turned into a wail of pain! **Waaahh!!!** As hundreds and thousands of fathers before him, dad (looking guilty and embarrassed) immediately said, "You're okay." A societal and cultural pattern was duplicated. Was a father was training his son to disconnect from feelings? To avoid the complexities of strong emotions including pain? Or was it just embarrassment that his son cried, or over his own poor



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supervision? Whatever the father's motivation, the most important issue was that the little boy was **not** okay!

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE IT....?

Andy who was seven years old was running all over the soccer field. Suddenly the ball bounced toward Andy. He took a swipe at it with his foot and missed. As Andy was turning around, another kid ran up and kicked the ball with all his might. **SMACK!** Flush right into Andy's face! "Yeow....ahhhh!" Andy screamed at the top of his lungs. Andy's father, the coach ran out into the field. Andy's face was turning a brilliant red! "Ahhhhhh!" Even before Andy's father reached him, you could tell Andy was more upset than hurt. "Ahhhhhh!" The first thing his father said, "You're okay." Andy, his face radiant red and covered with tears, for an instant forgotten his pain and gave the perfect response as he snapped in outrage, "What do you mean, I'm okay!?" **How would YOU like it if YOU got hit in the face with a soccer ball!?"** Andy was so outraged that his father would insinuate that he was okay -- that it was not okay for him to have pain -- that his tears and the sting on his face should be set aside, that Andy ironically forgot his pain for a moment! If Andy were even more articulate, he might add, "Maybe, I am not manly enough for you -- get over it! Being a man does not have to mean denying my feelings -- and guess what? Just because you do, doesn't mean I have to do it."

Sometimes an adult's discomfort with a child's pain and distress is not about some cultural or other bias about boy or girl standards, but from the adult's concern that the pain and distress may be overwhelming or dangerous to the child. However, treating a child or a person as if they cannot handle pain and other stresses implies that they are too fragile to handle their own emotions. It is important to allow children to have the emotions that are real for them. Allowing children to have powerful emotions like fear, anxiety, sadness, and disappointment will challenge you -- how much to intervene and how much to hold back, what is too much support and crippling, and what not enough and rejecting or abandoning.

NEVER BE LIKE THAT

Often times a child's distress ignites adult distress about their ability to protect their children, and/or an over identification and over empathizing with the child's distress. I worked with a Dad who was having difficulty putting his three-year old daughter to bed. He did not rush her to bed, nor was he trying to avoid the interactions (leave it to his wife). In fact, he relished the time together. He was a very involved dad who wanted very much to be emotionally available and connected. His father had been the classic provider who took care of material needs but did not know how to be emotionally connected. He disciplined harshly- sometimes abusively and terrifyingly. As a little boy, Dad had sworn that he would never be like that -- he was going to be a good... no, a great dad! And here he was in the bedroom of his youngest being available and being connected. And, stressing like crazy! They would do the entire routine: bath, washing up, bedtime stories, tucking her in, night lights, door slightly ajar, special kisses, and so forth. Then she would want more time, another hug, one more story, one more question, another shadow, and on...



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and on... until the 15 to 20 minute bedtime ritual became an hour, an hour and a half, and more.

Each time when he tried to finish and leave the bedroom, his darling would become tearful. It would break his heart. And he would go back in to soothe her... to soothe himself. Five or 10 minutes later, he would try to leave again. Again, his sweetheart would become tearful. She still wasn't okay. And he'd stay a little... and they would go another round. Each time his heart would break and he would try some more. Eventually frustration would set in and he would become angry and snap at her... and he would feel like the worst ogre in the world -- far too much like his abusive father. He would storm out of the bedroom -- feeling like dirt. Sooner or later... usually sooner, he would hear "daddy? Daddy? DADDY? **DADDY! DAAAAD-DEEEE!!!!**" He couldn't just abandon her and he'd go back in. And they would go another round -- "I'm thirsty," "I'm scared," "I need a kiss," and on... and on... and on... The magic pills -- the magic solutions: the night lights, the special going to bed books, a special teddy, and on and on, he tried them all; anything to be competent as a nurturing father. Anything to get his little girl to be okay when going to bed.

WHO'S NOT OK?

Who was not okay? Was it his daughter being challenged in the transition of going from the waking world to the sleeping world like millions of other children? Or was it dad who was not okay? It was the third and fourth persons in the bedroom that were causing all the problems. The first person was Dad who needed to help his daughter get to bed. The second person was the little girl with normal bedtime anxieties. The third and fourth persons were invisible but powerful. The third person was the father that Dad had sworn he'd never be like. And, the fourth person was the desperate hurt little boy that Dad had been -- with the pain that he could not let his daughter suffer. He needed to understand that he was a different father than his father and that he was a good dad. And that his daughter while upset was not being crippled with the rejection and desperation that he had suffered. With that he was able to follow through. Once he was able to remove the third and fourth persons (the ghost of his father and the ghost of himself in pain) from the bedroom, he was able to set boundaries and still nurture his daughter. Now he could tolerate that his daughter might not okay (right now) but still be fine. And that he really was okay.

There are levels of competence and there are levels of being okay. Being skillful and becoming competent in the areas that become important to you often depend on deeper levels of emotional and psychological soundness/competence. This is true for a child and is just as true for a parent. Feeling competent -- feeling okay for a child is strongly dependent on his/her parents feeling competent, feeling okay about themselves. Can you let your child feel distress? Does his/her distress, distress you so much that it becomes intolerable? Your child self-esteem depends on how you answer these questions.



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Chapter 17

COMPETENCE- DEALING WITH PAIN "I'M NOT OK!"

Sad... sad... dark... darker... it hurts. You know is just a small boo-boo...or, a misplaced teddy. I hurt. I'm scared. You try... you do care. But... dark, sad. You know that it will pass. You have the wisdom of experience. Me? I'm a little kid. All I know is right now. Sad... right now, I'm sad. Later? Later is not right now. Right now, I hurt. Before? I got better before? Before is not right now. Right now... dark. This...this is it. Sad. Me. Right now. Nothing else. Later... how to is later... Now. This is me... this is it.

You knew how before... when I was little... when I was a baby. I would get scared... be hurt. You didn't try to fix me. You didn't distract me from what I felt. You didn't say before... or later. You just held me and loved me. I could feel you feeling me feel. You said words... I couldn't understand them, but I could feel you. I had just feeling sounds. I just felt the feeling in your voice. The words really didn't matter. The caress of your voice... of your touch... in your eyes... I could feel you with me. And it got lighter... I got lighter. Mmmm... The sharp pain became soft hurt. A little less sad... better, lighter.

*You did it before, but what happened? I learned how to talk and you got stupid! You started thinking words... talking was how to take care of everything. You knew how to love me when I was sad or scared. Remember? I older now, but... sad... dark... hurt... scared... it's still the same. Feel me... feel my sadness, feel my darkness... my hurt... my fear... I'm not okay, but let me know **you** are okay with me not being okay. Love my feelings... don't be scared of them. Don't be so scared of me having those feelings. Mmmm... Better... better... feel me feeling... let me feel you feeling me... warm... better... safe... safe.*

THE RIGHT TO FEEL

It's hard watching our children feeling sadness, despair, or pain. We want to rescue them--to take away the pain. One day, your little girl comes home with a long sad face. What's wrong? They're going to do "Annie" at school. She wanted to be Annie. She would dress up and sing and dance. But she didn't get the role. Instead, she's going to be in the chorus. The pain on her face -- in her whole body is deep and heavy. Your heart breaks and all your instincts want to soothe her. So you say what thousands of other parents have said. "It's okay, honey. You'll be great in the chorus. The chorus is very important too."

Many children respond with silence; they have not been heard. They are **not** okay! They want to be okay but the pain is real. And, they had planned to do a good job in the chorus. Yes, it is an important role, but it was not the role she wanted. It's the loss that is causing the pain. A child may think, "Did my loving parent just ignore my pain? Did my loving parent just disrespect me? Does he/she really care? Does he/she really



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understand?" Or, perhaps to think, "My pain doesn't count. Maybe I shouldn't have this pain. Am I supposed to be able to just drop my hurting and focus on the chorus? Is there something wrong with me that I can't do that? That I hurt so much -- that I care so much?" Doubt about her right to feel what she feels begins to erode her self-esteem. On the other hand, she might get furious at this clumsy attempt to soothe her pain. She may snap back, "I'm **not** okay!" Or, if unable to articulate her pain, she may continue crying... throw a tantrum or lock herself in her room. Through words or through actions, parents express their own frustration and sense of impotence, and inadvertently emotionally punish their child for not being "okay." Self-esteem is harmed again. And, if your child is a boy, this dynamic can be even more dangerous since there are already so many forces directing them to avoid their feelings. This will create problems when they become adult men.

ONE MILLION FISH IN THE SEA

Did you ever break up with a loved one? Someone you had thought completed your heart and soul. In the depth of your anguish... your loss, you turned to a close friend for comfort. Your friend may have said, "Forget 'em! There is a million fish in the sea. Let's go out and catch you a new one!" And you felt.... confused and upset. Confused because you knew your friend was trying to nurture you (but failing), and upset because your friend was dismissing your pain. You didn't care about one million fish. You cared that the one you had who was no longer yours (whether or not you still wanted -- or could even stand him/her anymore!). The loss was about losing the hope of the perfect relationship -- the happily ever after picket fence dream. Not about losing that particular person. Your friend's good intentions disrespected the intensity and depth of the loss. You needed first to experience the loss and process it. It is always difficult to watch someone you care deeply about go through pain. You feel their anguish. In fact, the anguish you experience is worse because you do not know how intense it is for your friend or child. If it were your own pain alone, you'd know how much you could take and whether or not you could handle it.

IT'S OKAY TO BE NOT OKAY

Were you able to let your babies cry? Did you have to pick them up -- not because they couldn't stand it, but because **you** couldn't stand it? Did you pick them because they too fragile? Or, could they handle the distress with your help? Did you distract them with a toy, food, or later when they are older, with money. Unfortunately, the fundamental message of distracting children disrespects their existential reality. Distracting them -- pulling them away from their pain implies that what they feel it is not important. The stress people have is inherent to life. Dealing with distress -- the feeling of not being okay is how each person acquires the personalities and the skills that will help them succeed or not in the world. If you feel that you cannot tolerate stress or the feeling of not being okay, then you will be driven to find ways to avoid the feelings at all costs.

SELF-MEDICATION

As teenagers (sometimes as preadolescents) and as adults, people turn to self medication



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in order avoid overwhelming stress, depression, and anxiety. Self-medication can come in many forms. It can be essentially behavioral -- behaviors that allow one to forget or to avoid intense feelings: workaholism, excessive and compulsive exercising, or thrill seeking behavior. Or, chemical self-medication can be done with alcohol or drugs. Many people often misinterpret teenagers use of alcohol and drugs (especially marijuana) as purely recreational or a sign of negative values. Many teenagers use alcohol and drugs to self medicate for the depression, anxiety, and stress. Or, they may engage in dangerous activities that are highly stimulating -- the stimulation help block out intense negative feelings. Recent research says that compulsive behaviors create chemical changes within the body that function to change sensation and feeling (actually activate the body's own self-medicating chemicals). Eating disorders may also be ways to avoid intense painful feelings. An anorexic's intense feelings of hunger or/and compulsive overeater's intense sense of feeling bloated can serve to block out painful emotional and psychological feelings. Chocolate or shopping can also give you a "high" to serve to block out feelings.

AVOIDING PAIN AND STRESS -- THE STEALING OF THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR MATURITY

Individuals who have been self abusing with alcohol and drugs since they were 15 may go into recovery at 35. Although they may be clean and sober, they often still function emotionally and psychologically (and even intellectually) like a teenager. Why would this be true? Each time there is stress, pain, fear or anxiety, the individual is presented with an opportunity to gather him/herself emotionally, psychologically, mentally, physically, socially, and spiritually to face the challenge. As he/she gathered him/her self and struggled, the child gained a small increment of maturity. And, a sense of power and control and resiliency. As this happened thousands of times throughout their young lives and into adulthood, these increments accrue to make up the maturity of an healthy adult. Unfortunately, for some, the pain is intolerable... true love is not returned, a failing grade, a strikeout in the bottom of the ninth, an old friend who has become a new enemy, sexual confusion, and so forth. A teenager (or an adult) may deal with the pain chemically -- with a beer or with pot (marijuana). One time... next time... almost every time. And over and over, steal from him/herself the opportunity to gather him/herself and struggle, and in the struggle accrue the increments of maturity. After 20 years of lost opportunities... after 20 years of chemical solutions to stress, pain, fear, or anxiety, even after becoming clean and sober, the individual will still function emotionally and psychologically like a lost adolescent.

Intolerance of intense feelings can lead to self-medication and the loss of opportunities to gain maturity. Being able to have intense feelings **and** to have healthy resources and skills to alleviate their negative aspects are critical to emotional health. As parents, being emotionally present and available, nurturing and accepting are critical to helping your children develop the skills and resiliency to cope with pain. There will always be difficult times. One's ability to tolerate the pain well enough and long enough is essential for time to pass; and skills and resources to be applied. How does one develop the ability to tolerate pain? The only way is to experience pain and survive pain. In order to have



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healthy self-esteem, every person needs to be able to become competent at being uncomfortable! To become comfortable (enough) at being uncomfortable... at being not okay -- at least until they can gather themselves to deal with the discomfort. Resiliency is a key to self-esteem and a major key also to avoid developing a victim mentality or personality. In later chapters, we will start looking at victim personalities, beginning with the frustration they cause for caring people. Now, we will look at competence and its relationship to development.



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Chapter 18

COMPETENCE and DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICES

*Water... water... water... gotta find water. Wonderful smooth water. It feels so neat. It goes through my fingers... on my face... in my mouth... everywhere. Water... water... where the water? Go wash up for snack? Wash my hands with... water! Oooooo! Cool water... warm water... splish splash... water in the sink... water on the walls... splish splash... water on the floor... Oooooo! Stop it!? But... Oh, all right. Snack time... what's for snack? Crackers, a piece of the apple, and juice... juice? Juice! Looks like water... with color and pulp... and a different taste! Oooooo! It goes through my fingers... splish splash... on my face... in my mouth... everywhere... splish splash. Oooooo! Stop it!? Mess? Oh, all right... Time to paint. Painting is fun. All the pretty colors... brushes too. The paint looks kind of creamy -- not like water exactly. I wonder how it feels? Oooooo! ... running over my fingers. Smear it. It's more fun than using the brush -- swirl it here -- swirl it there... Oooooo! What? Stop it?! But but... oh, okay. Go out to play? Okay. It's nice outside. Oooooo! It rained last night! There's puddles! Oooooo! Splish splash! Splish splash with my hands! Splish splash with my feet! Oooooo! With mud! Oooooo! ... my fingers... on my face... on the fence... on Jenny! On Greg! Cool! Stop it!? Why? Mess? But... Oh, all right... Almost time for lunch? Time to go potty? Okay. Go inside to the bathroom... with the sink and... **the toilet!! Oooooo!! Oooooo!! YES!!***

STOP IT - STUNT IT

When faced with similar situations, many adults will focus on management issues. In other words, how to stop that kid from making such a mess! Unfortunately, when you focus on managing a child's behavior to fit within social custom (or, other adult hang ups!), you can often miss the need that the child is trying to fulfill. Normally, the satisfying of these needs is essential to the child's emotional or psychological balance, social, cognitive, physical maturation, and holistic development. As you stop their behavior, you may also stunt their self-fulfilling drive. For example, if there are strong emotional energies that are expressing themselves, over management (" You better stop that crying!") may prevent that expression and cause eventual emotional conflicts. If the need being asserted in the behavior is essentially developmental, then frustrating it may cause developmental problems.

DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICES

The principle of developmentally appropriate practices is key to facilitating the growth of children. Children (and adults) go through stages of development. In each stage, there are particular needs and issues. In each stage, they have particular abilities and limitations, challenges and tasks to accomplish. The movement from one stage to another depends on a combination of experiences, learning, and maturation. Within each stage, growth is primarily incremental -- a matter of quantity. Growth is primarily small increases of strength, increased frequency, greater agility, more of this or that. With increases in quantity, eventually there is a movement into a new qualitatively



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distinctive stage of development -- a stage with different needs, issues, abilities and inabilities, and challenges and tasks. When your baby is very young, he/she gradually increases his/her abilities in many areas. These are delightful to observe. However, every once in a while, your baby will do something new and wonderful that is fundamentally (qualitatively) different.

FROM BABBLING TO "BALL"

Your baby will babble over and over sounds that have no specific meaning. The more he/she babbles and experiments with different sounds and in different tones, the more he/she moves toward purposeful communication. And, when he/she says "Mama" or "Dada" or "dog" in recognition (sometimes the dog does rank higher!), that is a great developmental leap forward to sounds with meaning -- words. In this next stage of verbal and cognitive development, the baby acquires more and more words with meaning -- increased vocabulary. In this stage, each word serves multiple functions. For example, the word "ball" means, "That's a ball," "Throw the ball," "Give me the ball, Daddy," "Give Mommy the ball," "I want a ball," "I want the orange, or balloon," or whatever. The word "Mama" serves to mean a call for help, a name, an accusation, a request for service, and so forth. As the baby experiments with words, at some point he/she puts words together to create more specific meaning -- "Mama" plus "ball" are said in conjunction, "Mama ball" to communicate "Mama, I want you to give me the ball," or "Mama likes to eat oranges," or some other more specific relationship between Mama and the ball. This is another stage where the child experiments with combinations of words to create more precise communication -- in other words, the development of grammar and sentence structure in addition to vocabulary. There are comparable examples in physical development, social development, and other areas of development.

There are many ways parents can foster healthy development. However, parents also run the risk of frustrating themselves and their children if they do not understand developmental theories. The principle of developmentally appropriate practices means to support and to challenge children in ways that are appropriate to their developmental stages. If adults are unclear where their children are developmentally, they may inadvertently frustrate their children by pressuring them to do things that are beyond their developmental abilities. Children will feel incompetent and lose Self-Esteem as they struggle and fail at tasks beyond their developmental competency.

BASIC RULES OF DEVELOPMENTAL THEORIES

There are about five basic rules of developmental theories that can help adults support their children. The rules are:

Development is sequential. Development happens in a predictable order. There are first, second, third, and so forth stages in every area of development. For example, in order babies wave their arms and kick their legs before they can roll over and push up; then sit up; then crawl; finally, walk and then run.

Development is progressive. The challenges and successes (and the failures and incomplete accomplishments) of earlier development build for (or cause problems for)



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future development. For example, the development of secure attachment with primary caregivers (normally, the parents) give individuals the ability to risk and succeed at attachments with in subsequent relationships. Conversely, insecure attachments with primary caregivers make it difficult for children (even as adults) to form secure attachments.

Attempting to rush or skip development is harmful, causes problems,... and doesn't work! Developmental needs and challenges, including sequence and progression needs are intrinsic. If you attempt to ignore them, the intrinsic developmental energy will continue to assert itself until the needs are met. For example, many babies have a very strong oral need. For various reasons (cultural, recommendations from family or "experts," inconvenience), some parents try to keep babies and children from sucking on things -- including pacifiers and their thumbs. Despite a lot of work, children often continue into Kindergarten and beyond putting things into their mouths. The oral need continues to assert itself. In fact, there are theories relating unfulfilled oral needs from childhood to eating disorders, alcoholism and drug abuse.

Trauma, abuse, and intense stress can cause individuals to regress or get stuck developmentally. When faced with intense stress, children (and adults) may emotionally or psychologically regress to an earlier developmental stage where they hope to be taken care of -- to be nurtured as babies and protected. For children, it may mean getting whiny and pouting and waiting for someone to feel sorry for them... "You know what Susie did to me!?" For adults thing, it may mean getting whiny and pouting and waiting for someone to feel sorry for them! "You know what the boss (my wife, my husband, the clerk...) did to me!?" Developmentally stuck individuals function from a time when trauma or abuse occurred. As adults we have experienced adults, who acted like a two year old throwing a tantrum... or seemed like a defiant adolescent. Individuals suffering trauma or abuse may get emotionally or psychologically stuck at that developmental age. This creates complex issues that may be problematic throughout their entire lives.

Satiation of developmental needs helps individuals progress developmentally. Movement through the sequences and the progression of development depends on the needs of the stage being satisfied -- satiated. Skipping or rushing development does not allow for needs to be completely satiated. Trauma, abuse, and intense stress can overwhelm the developmental capacities of an individual -- by definition, are outside the capacities of developing individuals. They draw the individual's focus away from satisfying their developmental needs. Recognizing needs as developmental and facilitating the complete satisfaction of these needs becomes the key to helping individuals progress.

KEITH, GO PLAY IN THE WATER

Keith was driving everyone crazy. He was always in the water or something wet. He was always either being a mess or making a mess! The adults, of course wanted things to be neater, and were always telling Keith to cut it out. "Keith, stop playing in the water." "Keith, get out of the water." "Keith, stop making a mess!" Keith was driving everyone crazy. And, everyone was driving Keith crazy! Keith was responding to a powerful



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internal need in the sensory motor stage of development. When an individual has a developmental need, he/she normally explores and experiments with that need until it is satisfied. By telling him to stop it all the time, the adults were inadvertently frustrating his developmental process. Keith could not choose to do or not do it; playing with water was a compelling need. And everyone kept stopping him from satisfying it! If he could only satisfy himself, he would stop himself. When we figured this out, I told the teachers to stop disrespecting Keith -- to stop disrespecting his developmental energy.

So we set up a sink with warm water and bubbles, spoons, funnels, bowls, and sieves (and rubber mats on the floor). As soon as Keith came in, we dropped an apron on him and told him to "Play in the water!" And, did he ever! Splish splash... splish splash... water was flying everywhere! Keith loved it! And, it was in an appropriate and safe setting. After 30 minutes, Keith went to play someplace else. The next time Keith came by, we dropped an apron on him again and told him to "Play in the water!" Splish splash... **splish splash** splish **SPLASH!**... again Keith had a ball for about 20 minutes. The next time he passed by, again we dropped an apron on him and told him to "Play in the water!" Every time he came by -- an apron and "Play in the water!" Finally, as we grabbed him once more, Keith stuck out his pouty lip and in a sad voice, proclaimed, "I dun' wanna to play in the water anymore! I wanna play outside... Please?" By eleven o'clock every day, Keith's need to play in the water had been satiated. After two weeks of this, Keith's need to play in the water had been satiated altogether, and with this sensory motor need satisfied, Keith moved on to other developmental tasks.

When you understand children's needs from a developmental perspective (or from temperamental theory, or family systems perspectives, or learning theory, or other relevant theories), you can better support them. You can help them competently fulfill their needs and have healthy progress. If you do not recognize a need as developmental, you might frustrate its fulfillment. If you do not recognize the appropriate developmental challenge your child is ready for, you might set up your child to feel incompetent. For example, three year old children are not supposed to be able to nor need to read. Reading at this age does not mean your child is brilliant. Probably, it means your child has been rushed developmentally inappropriately. Reading this early can be very harmful to meeting more appropriate developmental needs. Children who read at three often read robotically without comprehension, and usually without any joy. At three, children need to be exploring and experimenting with their environment, including the social and emotional environment. These experiences contribute to overall development (including the development of pre-reading skills!) that form the healthy individual.



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Chapter 19

FOUR DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES DOGGIE...DOGGIE... NOT DOGGIE? RABBIT!!

"Come give Grandma a big hug!" Here comes Johnny! *"Grandma!"* 40 pounds of Johnny running to Grandma in her chair... leaping... flying through the air... dropping like a boulder into Grandma's lap! Ummpf!! Crunch! Oh no! *"Don't jump on Grandma like that... you'll hurt her!"* Oh. *"Okay."* Johnny loves Grandma... he doesn't want to hurt her... got it -- Don't jump on Grandma anymore.

Two months later. Auntie Nan is here for a visit. *"There's my favorite great nephew! Johnny, come give Auntie a big hug!"* Oh no! Here comes Johnny! *"Auntie Nan!"* **45 pounds** of Johnny running to Auntie in her chair... leaping... flying through the air... dropping like an **asteroid** into Auntie Nan's lap! Ummpf! Crunch! Oh no, not again! *"Didn't I tell you before, not to jump in Auntie Nan's lap!?"*

Mmmm? No, you didn't tell me not to jump on Auntie Nan's lap. You told me not to jump on Grandma's lap. Remember I'm only four? You told me, but I am an existential child -- that means that was then... and this is now! I live in the moment! Before? Before is when you were a kid... when the dinosaurs ruled the earth... five minutes ago... two days... two months... ten years ago... when George Washington chopped that cherry tree... you told me not to jump on Grandma's lap. That is not Grandma! That is Auntie Nan. They look kinda alike because they're sisters!

*How was I to know that the underlying principle of not jumping on Grandma's lap is that Grandma is an old lady... and that old ladies might have osteoporosis... and may be somewhat brittle! And that jumping on her might scrunch her! And then I was supposed to figure out that since Auntie Nan is an old lady too, I shouldn't jump on her either because she is scrunchable too!! Jeez! I'm four!! -- a **preoperational** child!? Not even a **concrete operations** child yet! Let alone a **formal operations** child when I finally am supposed to be able to do divergent thinking! **NO, YOU DIDN'T TELL ME!!***

Kids don't know how to respond like this... thank goodness! Perhaps they should when parents make developmentally inappropriate demands. Is Johnny really supposed to be able to understand that a specific rule -- that is, "Don't jump on Grandma's lap," has implicit meaning for future behavior based on unarticulated underlying principles? Clearly, when he was younger (how young?), you didn't expect Johnny to understand this. What age is it possible -- reasonable to expect them to figure it out? Intuitively, we understand that children's ability to understand and to do things improve as they grow older. However, if we are unclear we overwhelm our children by demanding that they do and understand things that they are not developmentally able to handle. We set children up to be incompetent and to suffer Self-Esteem loss. A look at some basic developmental theory -- specifically, the cognitive theory of Jean Piaget would help us determine what



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we should or should not expect from our children as they grow up.

SO DIFFERENT -- ASSIMILATION AND ACCOMMODATION

Piaget believed that all children adapt to the environment. They build upon their sensory, motor, and reflex capacities to learn about the world. Picking up toys, touching the cat, crawling around the room -- all these experiences help them to figure out how the world works. They develop **schemes** -- organized ways to think about and act in situations. As people experience more, their schemes become more varied and complex.

When our baby was a few months old, Laura came to visit. Trisha gazed intently at Laura's face. My wife and I are both Asian-American with dark brown eyes and black hair. Laura is European American, fair skinned, blue-eyed, with very curly long blond hair. As Laura held her, Trisha stared at Laura -- absorbing every detail. "Hey, what's this?" Her little brain trying to figure out how this face that was similar to Mom's and Dad's faces but was so different! Eyes, nose, mouth, and hair, uh huh... but the complexion... and the color of those eyes!... and that hair! It is hair, isn't it? Not black and straight but golden... What is it doing!? Wow!

From Piaget's perspective, Trisha had a way of understanding the world -- a **scheme** about faces based on her experiences with her parents. Now she had to make an **adaptation** to deal with new information -- Laura's incredibly curly blond hair! To make an adaptation, people usually take a two-step process. First, they attempt to **assimilate** the information into a previous scheme (way of understanding). Trisha was trying to fit Laura's fair skin, blue eyes, and curly blond hair into how she understood faces (from models of her parents' faces). A baby who learns that the four-legged furry critter running underfoot is called a "doggie," starts identifying every furry animal a "doggie." Jackie next door has a furry critter... a doggie? That's right! That's a German Shepherd... it's a doggie too. The poodle is a doggie... the St. Bernard is a doggie... the dachshund is a doggie... whatever that mutt Josie has... is a doggie! "That's right, Trisha! Good girl!" Assimilation works.

Now, baby sees another furry four-legged critter. "Doggie!" But this critter has long ears, a fuzzy little tail, eats carrots, and goes lippitty lippitty hop! Baby thinks rabbits are doggies, cats are doggies, cows are doggies... all doggies! Assimilation doesn't work... well enough. The second step to adaptation when assimilation into previous schemes doesn't work, is to **accommodate** the new information/experience into a new way of thinking/understanding. The furry four-legged critters that go "bow wow!" are doggies; the ones with long ears, a fuzzy little tail, eats carrots, and goes lippitty lippitty hop is a rabbit! The ones that go "meow" and scratches if you squeeze too hard are kitties! And so forth. Each one of these is an adjustment in the previous scheme to make better sense of the world.

As people experience the world and try to make sense of it, they move into more mature stages of development. Piaget believed that there are four major stages of cognitive



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development: approximately birth to 2, the Sensorimotor stage; 2-7, the Preoperational stage; 7-12, the Concrete Operations stage; and 12 and up, the Formal Operations stage.

EXPLORE AND EXPERIMENT -- CRASH! BOOM! BANG!... WAHHH!!

In sensorimotor stage, an infant changes from responding primarily through reflexes to organizing activities in relation to the environment. Sensory and motor activity fuels the change. Parents understand infants' ability to express and interact is limited. However, in meeting babies' fundamental practical and emotional needs, parents give them the sensory and motor stimulation necessary for intellectual development. Infants and toddlers need to explore and experiment with their world as much as possible. The problem is as they explore and experiment, they may do things that scare that heck out of you! Crash! Boom! Bang!... Wahhh!!

The challenge of parenthood is how to facilitate exploration and experimentation without your darling hurting or breaking something, or driving your blood pressure through the roof! Children are supposed to explore and experiment... they have to explore and experiment! They will break things, endanger themselves, scare you, and generally, make your life much more complex and difficult. It is not unusual for some parents to experience children's activity as intrusions -- as purposeful and callous attacks on adult serenity; and adults may respond with resentment and punishment. This is dangerous. Children are doing what is natural and **essential** to their development. Crash! Boom! Bang!... Oh well! Understand this, set the limits for safety and for socialization, but don't stifle the drive to explore and experiment.

LIGHTNING BUGS AND LIGHTS -- PREOPERATIONAL TO CONCRETE OPERATIONS

If you replace the word "operation" with the word "rules," it can help in understanding the differences between the preoperational, the concrete operations, and the formal operations stages. They become the pre-rules, the concrete rules, and the formal or abstract rules stages of cognitive development. The preoperational or pre-rules stage between about 2 to 7 years old is a time when children have so little experience with the world, that they don't understand the rules and workings of the world. Everything is magic and magical. "The light switch opens the jar of lighting bugs in the wall. They fly out through the walls and ceiling into the light bulbs... and that's how the lights work!" And the kids go, "Ooooh!" Also, ATMs give us money! And, if you don't wear a jacket, you'll catch a cold... and you made me forget... and you knew you weren't supposed to do that.

In the preoperational stage, everything is magical... or is everything is arbitrary? Unfortunately (for their Self-Esteem) children believe everything adults (especially parents) say -- whether adults are angry, frustrated... or even crazy! Parents can teach rules children that are unfair, unreasonable, and even cruel. Particularly in this stage, when children are learning from everyone and everything, they are highly vulnerable to emotionally and psychologically harmful interpretations. "Didn't I tell you!? You knew



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better than that!" must be replaced by "Daddy is tired. And got grumpy... and when you... I got upset and..."

From 2 to 7, they gradually acquire more rules about how the world works. They develop schemes (rules) like object permanence (objects or people continue to exist even when they are out of sight), decentering (thinking simultaneously about several aspects of the situation as opposed to being centered on one aspect), conservation (something remains equal despite changing shape or being placed in different containers), reversibility (an operation or action can go both ways -- be reversed). From the vagueness of the preoperational or pre-rules stage, at around 7 children move toward the concrete operations or rules stage. Now, they know the lightning bug story is a joke. About the ATM... let me tell you how that works... actually, how that doesn't work!

EASY COME... BIG TROUBLE!! FORMAL OPERATIONS

For the next several years, children develop greater clarity and numbers of concrete rules about how the world, how people, and how they themselves function. These rules, however, tend to be very specific to particular people or circumstances. without understanding of underlying principles. Consequently, applying a principle to a person or circumstance and coming up with an appropriate response is difficult. Children may learn to eat their carrots... to eat fruit... to take vitamins... to exercise... to read because it is good for them. Not to eat too much candy... to avoid excessive stress because it is bad for them. Underlying all the specific rules are principles about behaviors that promote positive consequences and those that create potential negative consequences. Children learn to say to be good and do good things. However, unless specifically told, they may still eat high salt fatty hamburgers. Or, associate with a friend who is abusive... or, play video games instead of doing homework.

Through positive and negative experience **and** maturation... from specific commandments to do or not, children move into the formal operations or abstract rules stage, where they recognize and apply underlying principles to specific situations. From specific experiences: "When things came too easily, and I ended up with problems. Jason said we could eat as many cookies as we wanted, and we got sick and in trouble with my mom. I was lazy and copied Jill's homework, and then there was a quiz that I messed up because I had not learned the material in the homework. Once Glenn said he had a way for us to make a lot of money and we got stuck with four big boxes of wrapping paper," a principle is derived -- "If something good is easy to get, or is supposed to be easy to get, you better watch out! Easy come... big trouble!" Then (hopefully) the underlying concept is applied to a new situation or experience. "Drugs are an easy way to feel good... Watch out! Easy come... big trouble! No!"

We can not give our children exact instructions to deal with all the circumstances and people that they will experience. So we try to give them the logic with which they can make the decisions. However, the development of this abstract logic depends on children experiencing consistency throughout childhood (from the sensorimotor stage through the



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preoperational stage and through the concrete operations stage). Consistency means that if A then B, it happens virtually every single time. Without consistency, there is not the basis from which the child can discover underlying logic. Even with consistency, developmentally it is difficult to understand abstract logic significantly before age 12 or so. "Didn't I tell you...?" Maybe you did, but remember what I can and can not understand (and other words, my developmental comprehension maturity level)? Recognizing your children's intellectual (cognitive) stage can help you avoid making them feel incompetent, and help you frame developmentally appropriate communication. Significance, moral virtue, power and control, and competence make up the four components of Self-Esteem. How they interact and are dependent upon each other is important to understand.



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Chapter 20

THE FOUR LEGGED TABLE OF SELF-ESTEEM IF ANY ONE LEG IS WEAK...

I don't know why Grady doesn't feel better about himself.

The Golden Boy!? Samuel's feels depressed?

*Alice... Miss Competent?! Low Self-Esteem?! How?
Why?*

Rose is such a responsible kid, but she seems so sad.

According to Coopersmith, self-esteem is made up of four components: Significance, whether or not the people that are significant to you believe that you are significant (important) and; Moral Virtue, how well an individual lives up to the values that he/she holds dear; Power and Control, the degree that an individual has power and control in his/her lives; and Competence, how skillful the individual is doing the things he/she finds important. These four components are important in themselves, but also are highly interdependent. They are very much like the four legs of a table -- all four of the legs need to be strong, or else the stability of the entire table is harmed. If any one leg is weak... any aspect of self-esteem is weak, no matter how strong the other three legs are, the table... self-esteem will not be solid.

EVERYTHING EXCEPT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT -- Missing Significance Feedback

Grady, four years old is visiting at dad's house. His six-year-old half-brother, Evan lives with his father. Dad is gruff and intimidating to him. Grady has learned to work things out from his mother-- to use his words because good kids work things out instead of fighting. Grady has the action figure that Evan wants. Evan snatches the action figure from Grady. Grady tries to live up to his internalized morality. He tells Evan that he didn't like him grabbing the toy. Grady tries negotiating. He offers Evan the other action figures and offers to take turns.

If an adult makes his big brother give him the action figure back, then Grady might learn that only adults have the power to work things out. On the other hand, if he successful with his own words, Grady's self-esteem would probably be boosted since he has gained power and control (gotten the action figure), experienced competence (succeeded as a problem solver) while being able to live up to his own moral values (by being able to work things out). However, all this can be broken down if someone significant to him belittles or disrespects him and how he managed the situation. Dad sees the interaction and gets outraged at Evan. "Don't be a baby! Grab that back! Don't be letting him push you around!"



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The first people who are significant are parents. Then other family members, teachers,... and peers. If any of these people implicitly or overtly disapprove of the child's behavior, despite living up to their own moral virtue (or reflecting social standards), how competent they are problem solving and gaining power and control, self-esteem would be shaken. Also, being ignored when doing well, can be just as damaging. Ever been in a job situation where there's no acknowledgement for contributions -- only criticism for messing up? Self-esteem and employee morale goes down.

SUCCESSFUL EXCEPT FOR THE GHOST OF DAD -- Impossible Moral Virtue Demands

Samuel is a highly successful businessman, respected in the community, and loved by his family. His colleagues and even his competitors admire him; his neighbors and friends respected his character; and his family loves and adores him. His achievements have given him power and control to choose work that is stimulating, meaningful, and rewarding; to live an the enjoyable lifestyle; and to be a good provider. All indications from his life indicate that he should be a happy fulfilled individual. Samuel, however, could not enjoy all the successes of his life. When Samuel came to counseling, he was depressed with low self-esteem. What was his problem? Three of the four components of self-esteem -- significance, power and control, and competence were strong. However, the fourth component -- an unhealthy moral virtue weakened his entire structure of self-esteem.

Samuel's father was very critical of Samuel and his siblings during their entire childhoods. No matter how well Samuel or his siblings did, his father would find something to criticize. In Little League, if Samuel got the winning hit, his father would find fault with how Samuel stood in the field. If Samuel got straight A's... who got the highest score? And so on and so on. Samuel never could do enough to please his father no matter how much he tried. And he tried... and tried... and tried. Even after his father had died, Samuel continued to try to please... and fail to please the ghost of his father. He had internalized an impossible set of values (moral virtue) of being perfect for father. Samuel's ideal self was as unreasonable and unfair as his father had been unreasonable and unfair. Despite constant confirmations of significance, power and control, and competence, Samuel's self-esteem remained fragile because the formation of his moral virtue had been distorted from childhood. Through a lot of work, Samuel was able to challenge and rebuild his moral virtue. He was able to redefine his ideal self in more appropriate and reasonable ways, and consequently, accept the successes of his real self performance.

BRIGHT, A GOOD KID, AND VERY COMPETENT, BUT... No Power and Control

Alice has always been a very good kid... attentive and respectful to adults, especially her parents. She got along with everyone. Alice expected a lot out of herself and was able to live up to her standards. Since middle school, she had been doing volunteer tutoring and



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working as a candy striper at the community hospital. At 16 years old, she was clear that she wanted a professional career helping people. She had the grades to pursue a career in a human services profession such as social work or psychotherapy. A well loved and well-respected individual, with a strong and healthy moral virtue, and highly competent, Alice was also very frustrated with a growing sense of helplessness.

Alice had been offered an internship at a community health clinic. Although she would be doing clerical work, she would get to experience human services work and begin to meet potential mentors that would facilitate her academic and professional careers. It was a tremendous opportunity for her. However, her parents would not let her do it. They felt she was too young. They felt that she should be focusing on school. This is the third time; the first time was a summer excursion to Washington D.C. to meet with the local Representative in Congress and learn about the political process, and the second time, was an honorary position as a teen advocate for a school district anti-violence committee. With all the compliments, Alice was still frustrated -- even insulted, and definitely helpless. She was losing opportunities to exercise her skills and stretch herself. All her life, her parents had been telling her that she would have to make choices on her own, but now her parents were saying "No, not that choice!" She felt she had no power and control because of her parents' decision... and her self-esteem suffered. Any adult who has ever had the skills to do the work but was not given opportunity to do the work ("We really like you. And you are well qualified, but we can't use you."), knows how lost opportunity becomes lost power and control. Without the opportunity, even with significance, moral virtue and competence, power and control cannot be exercised and self-esteem suffers.

SO SHE TRIES... BUT SHE CAN'T -- Unreasonable Competence Demands

Rose is another well mannered child... a very responsible child. She never causes any trouble. She sees herself as well behaved, a good student, who helps her parents out a lot. In fact, at 12 years old, she is responsible to make sure her younger siblings do their chores and homework before their parents come home at 6:00. They have to do what she says. Her younger sister, Daisy who is 10, however has begun to resent Rose's authority. "You're not my mother! You can't tell me what to do!" Instead of coming home right after school, she stops to talk with her friends. She sometimes refuses to do her chores or watches television instead of doing her homework. Rose tries to discipline Daisy. But she can't. When their parents come home and find out that Daisy has not done her chores or her homework, they get mad at her... **and** at Rose. "It's up to you to make sure Daisy behaves. We're depending on you. You have to do better."

Rose wants very much to please her parents, live up to her self-image as being responsible, and maintain the power and control she has. However, being a surrogate parent is developmentally beyond Rose's capabilities (especially with a oppositional sister only two years younger). Rose is very vulnerable to losing her Self-Esteem as she tries and fails to live up to a role that she cannot be competent at. Even if her parents understand that Daisy is beyond her control ("Do the best you can with Daisy. We



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understand that she is being defiant."), her high standards for herself (moral virtue) would drive her to keep trying anyway.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Grady needs to feel supported by those important to him. Samuel needs to develop a realistic moral virtue. Alice needs to exercise and experience power and control. Rose needs to feel competent attempting what is a realistic and appropriate. By understanding how four aspects of self-esteem work together, you can better put it together and build the self-esteem of your child... and of yourself. However, there is more to it (there's more to furnishing a house than just a table!). What else do you need to know in order to put it altogether? You need to know the seven fundamentals of the foundation (**YOU!!**) to building the self-esteem in your child.