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## BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

### Chapter 21

#### THE FOUNDATION OF SELF-ESTEEM -- -- YOU!!

*It was tough being a kid. I didn't feel good about myself. In fact, I really didn't like myself very much. It wasn't that my parents didn't love me -- I knew they loved me. And, I loved myself. When I first went to school, I was excited. It was fun and I felt good. Later school became rough. Someone else was always more popular... smarter... more athletic... better looking. Some of the kids were so mean. I didn't get beat up much, but the things that they said to me... about me. Other kids treated me like I was invisible. Sometimes I felt so unimportant... such a dork! My self-esteem was terrible. It's cost me so much energy, time, and pain... and, it still costs me today. I don't want... I **can't** let my kids go through that pain. How can I save them?*

For many adults, adulthood has been a struggle to regain the self-esteem that had been lost or harmed during childhood. Normally nurtured children develop a sense of self and consequently a sense of self-esteem as their caregivers take care of their primary needs. Infants are appropriately egocentric and selfish. As their needs are met, they become toddlers who love themselves. However as they enter into the community of the family, of preschool, and others, socialization demands affect their self-esteem. Preschool teachers have noticed that children's self-esteem sometimes begin to break down as they go through their three-year old and four-year old years. As there are even greater demands (academic, physical, and social) in kindergarten and in elementary school (and still more, in middle school and high school), the destruction of self-esteem can be overwhelming. Estimates of self-esteem (of children liking themselves) by the 4th grade have been as low as 20%... of high school students at 5%. From experience, research, and/or intuition, parents recognized that their children are at risk. How much easier it would be for their children if they could maintain their early self-esteem through childhood and pass adolescence, than to have to rebuild it in the adulthood.

#### STILL SUFFERING

Parents often look at their children and worry that they too will suffer greatly. For some parents, their adult lives have been extremely difficult as well as a consequence of their low self-esteem. For them, the concern is not just that their children might suffer as they **had** suffered but will suffer as they **are still** suffering. In other words, they wish to save and empower their children even though they themselves have not saved or empowered themselves. Unfortunately, parents with low self-esteem are significantly handicapped in trying to build the self-esteem of their children. Many of the theories, strategies, techniques, and interventions that are sound in affecting positive growth and discipline with children are often difficult for such parents to follow through on. Their low self-esteem creates a sense of insecurity and of helplessness which compromises their attempts at discipline and support. Often these parents will resort to looking for the "magic pills" -- magical solutions rather than sound theory directing appropriate interactions. Unfortunately, some professionals and scholars will cater to this weakness and offer interventions as if the interventions themselves will automatically work. As with a house, the foundation is the key to the creating a solid



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structure. The foundation for creating solid self-esteem in children is the psychological and emotional health of the parents. There are seven fundamentals to this foundation.

### **#1 KNOW YOURSELF**

If building self-esteem is similar to building a house, what is the first thing you do to build the foundation? The world... the terrain upon which you build a child self-esteem is full of dangers: child abuse, gains, alcohol and drug abuse, hatred, bigotry including sexism and racism, domestic violence, poverty, economic uncertainty, ecological crises, and so forth. Ideally, we would love to level this terrain... to eliminate these issues before we have to raise our children. Unfortunately, this is impossible or impractical, since your kid doesn't have time to wait for that! To build the foundation, the first thing you need to do is to dig down. Every adult brings the totality of their life experiences into every relationship. This includes in addition to their self-esteem, their personality, temper and frustrations, intelligence, cultural background, values, childhood experiences, education, hopes and dreams... fantasies and illusions, goals, successes and failures, joys and traumas, media messages, and parenting models.

Do you have high self-esteem? Do you have issues about control (that will be challenged by your children)? Is there a parent you are determined not to be? Who is the parent you are determined to be? Will your children be a reflection of your worth? Are you scared of failure (including failing as a parent)? Do you have co-dependent tendencies? How well do you deal with anger... fear... tears... anxiety? Is there someone you are trying to please? And so on and so on. All these issues and others are critical to how you parent your child. I have seen many parents who parent from the frustration of their lives... from the anxieties of their past... from the anger in their soul... from the fear and pain of their traumas, and lose track of the needs of their children or the demands of the current reality. When they are supposedly addressing their children's needs for support, guidance, and discipline, they are actually dealing with their personal ghosts -- their own emotional and psychological turmoil and vulnerabilities.

Every person brings into adulthood the ghosts of their childhood (as well as their successes). It is when a person does not acknowledge, challenge, and overcome their ghosts, that these emotional and psychological issues interfere with their relationships -- especially their most intimate relationships with their spouses and children. If you acknowledge and challenge your ghosts, you may not overcome them but at least, you may be able to keep them under enough control that they do not interfere with your relationship with your children -- so that they not create new ghosts for your children.

### **#2 BEING A MODEL OF SELF-LOVE**

Several years ago, I worked with a woman who had been married for 10 years to an emotionally abusive man. They had two children: a 1 1/2 year old girl and a 9 year-old boy. For 10 years, she had accepted the abuse from her husband. Finally, after he had picked up the little girl and grown her across the room in a fit of rage, she decided that it was too much. She moved out with the kids and filed for divorce. Her life was much more tranquil... for a while. A few months later, she came to me in tears. Her nine-year-old boy had become extremely



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abusive to her. He was very disrespectful, cussed at her, and hit her. This should have not been a surprise. She had not love herself enough over these 10 years to remove herself from the abuse of her husband. She had not valued herself enough to leave him for herself. She had loved the children enough, that when **they** were endangered that she removed them from the abuse. Her son had observed all of this. Now he too believed that she did not to serve to be treated with respect... after all, she had never asserted that she deserved to be treated with respect. In addition, he had the model of his father abusing her over these many years. Now it was his turn.

This woman understood that her attraction to her husband in the first place and her vulnerability to accepting his abuse was the consequence of the abusive relationship that she had with her father in her childhood. Unfortunately, she still blamed herself for not been good enough for her father to love and to treat well. She had also blamed yourself for not being good enough for her husband to love and to treat well either. She had low self-esteem and she wanted it to be better for her children. So she had ignored her own pain and poured her love and attention into the children. She sacrificed herself, but still had failed her children. If she had loved herself enough to leave her husband many years earlier, she would have been a model of self-love for her children. She would have never allowed her husband to continue to abuse her, and her son would not have gotten message that it was appropriate to abuse her.

### **CHOICES TO SURVIVE -- YOUR GHOSTS**

To be able to acknowledge and accept your ghosts -- the emotional and psychological consequences of life struggles, you must be able to accept yourself. Accepting yourself means that you're able to accept the choices that you made as a child or the best that you could to. Acquiescing and trying to please her father was the only way this woman knew how to survive. She carried this approach forward to her relationship with her husband despite the pain and shame it caused her. Many people have shame and even anger at themselves for the choices that they made when they were younger, more vulnerable, and at the mercy of more powerful people -- usually their parents or teachers. Children make choices to survive that are thrust upon them. In other words, the choices they make are compelling choices that at a different time as a more powerful adult, they would no longer make. When a person is truly able to know him/herself, he/she will also be able to accept him/her self and their childhood choices; and, come to love both the child he/she was that had to survive and the adult he/she is now.

The remedies to her issues -- both in her marriage and with her son would have to do with setting limits. Her ability to follow-through on such remedies, however, was compromised -- defeated by the unresolved ghosts of her childhood that she had not yet addressed. She did not love herself and both her husband and her son responded to that and took permission to be abusive. Her son's abuse of her was from his pain about himself. His self-esteem had been compromised in observing the dynamic between his mother and father. It's hard to love yourself when the foundation of your sense of self -- your parents have such a toxic relationship. In addition, her daughter whose personality was similar to her mother was going to be at great risk to carry these ghosts forward as her own. Her daughter could easily be just like mom, and learn not to love herself either... to put others' needs ahead of hers... to blame



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herself for her unlovability. And become vulnerable to the predators of the world -- perhaps, to find a spouse just like dear ol' dad. Will this woman be able to break this cycle? To prevent it from caring forward in the next generation with her son and her daughter? Perhaps, but only if she looks less at what to do with her son and more at how to meet her own needs. She can only do this if she is able to love herself. What is her son's (and her daughter's) need? To have a model of a mother who loves herself appropriately! Only then, can they learn how to love themselves appropriately. Being a model of self-love is critical to forming the foundation (yourself) to building the self-esteem of children.

We will continue to look at more of the seven fundamentals of the foundation (**YOU!!**) to building the self-esteem in your child in future articles. Before we do that, we will invest several chapters to examine the dynamics that can lead to a lifetime of being victimized as this woman had been.



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### Chapter 22

#### "BENEFITS" FROM BEING A VICTIM

**Whomp!!... OWWW!!** What happened? I was running... must have tripped.... Ow! (Peek) Where's mom? Where's dad? Oh, there they are. Ow! Owww! Owwwww! Are they coming over? Are they looking? **Ow! Owww! Owwwww!** I'm gonna to **die!** Broken bones! Internal injuries! Blood! Well...there could be broken bones! How come they're not rescuing me? (Peek) Are they coming over? **Mommy! Daddy! Ow! Owww! Owwwww! .... Mommeeee!! Daddeeee! OwOwOwOw!!!** What's their problem? Can't they see me here lying on the ground? They're acting like it's just a scratch...

Well, may be it is just a scratch... but... but... **I'm gonna die!** Hurry up!! They're acting like it's no big deal. **Mommeeee!! Daddeeee!** Your baby is lying here on the ground... **dying!!** Save me! Help me! I'm not going to make it! ... maybe they can't hear me... maybe I don't sound hurt enough. Maybe more tears... maybe... more volume!!  
**mm...MM...MOM...MEEEE...EE...ee!! dd...DD...DAD...DEEEE...EE...ee! OW! OWWW! OWWWWW! AHHHH!** I'm being... **I'm being TRAUMATIZED!**

#### THE VICTIM MENTALITY/PERSONALITY

The sense of survive-ability that is so critical to a person's success comes through being given the opportunity to be successful (be competent) in handling the stressful challenges of life – including dealing with not being okay. Being able to trust your parents to be there for you, starts the development of a sense of survivability -- of resiliency. However, your parents cannot always be there. Getting used to, and depending on being rescued becomes dangerous. The more you mature, the more you must depend on yourself. Without the ability to handle stress, some individuals develop a victim personality. How can we keep your children from becoming victims? And why do they still make us so crazy... so frustrated?... even guilty?

An article on bullies and victims in the September/October 1995 issue of Psychology Today noted that about 22% of children experienced being bullied sometime during the school year. However, only 8-9% of kids became the constant targets of bullies throughout the school year. Why did more than half of the bullied children stop becoming the targets of victimization? Why did that 8-9% of children become the prey that the bullies returned to over and over? Is it about nurturing?

Their parents love them, and caring people including peers and teachers are initially drawn to care for and help them. However, eventually the same people become more and more frustrated and negative to them as well. It is important to acknowledge that no one... **no one** likes victims. Individuals who are victimized draw our hearts to them. However, as we empathize with their pain and suffering, their seeming inability to learn, to change, to grow, to stop being victimized over and over again becomes more and more frustrating... **to us!** Caring for and identifying with a victim brings pain to people that care for them. Caring people's own sense of impotence (of being helpless just like a victim) is activated. The caring person tries to



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help. However, the perpetual victim never seems able to take this help, this guidance, and this love to become more able and successful. This ignites the caring person's own doubts about their power and control. As a result, caring people (even parents) often become angry and dismissive of the perpetual victim (even your own child!). But in rejecting the victim, they (we) are usually filled with guilt. We intuitively recognize this is a duplication of many prior abandonments and rejections... of prior abuses. Feeling guilty, caring people go back again and again to help, to save, to protect... and, to fail again to get the victim to stop being a victim. Caring people's own sense of competency as nurturers -- as "good" people -- as loving, caring, and supportive parents is damaged.

### **LOLLI AND TOOTSIE OF THE POP FAMILY**

The frustration with interacting with perpetual victims often become so overwhelming that people find themselves avoiding such people. People you love dearly can destroy your own sense of worth. When I work with staff in human services organizations, I sometimes present a scenario with an easily recognizable classic victim personality. Staff respond with knowing nods and deep meaningful sighs. Human services staff are full wonderful people with tremendous heart and integrity, who are committed to helping people. What people present themselves in need, these wonderful staff are drawn to them. Unfortunately, as much as staff try, certain people seem not able to be helped. Instead, they are in a constant state of need and neediness. Somehow all that is offered: interventions, referrals, material things, connections, and sometimes, even money is taken with a great appreciation, yet does not seem to be effective. In fact, recipients seem to sabotage their own success, change, and growth. The caring staff offers more help, more resources, and more encouragement. Again, people are extremely appreciative.... And still fail to follow-through, or are victimized again. Domestic violence counselors who work with women who continue returning to toxic and abusive relationships, experience this frustration. Over and over the dance repeats -- a call for help, aid given, aid taken, failure,... a new call for help, more aid given, and so forth. As much as caring/helping people see that certain people seem to self-sabotage... seem to have an inability to be successful, they continue to be drawn in again and again to give and to be frustrated.

Gradually, the helping people begin themselves to feel like victims; to have been victimized -- coerced into saving people who seem not to be able to be saved! They begin to feel like Lolli and Tootsie of the Pop family -- the latest Lollipop or Tootsie Pop in a line of suckers! When I made this joke recently to a group of human services workers, they laughed uproariously....at themselves! They had all too often experienced being "suckered" into "helping" in ways that were ineffective for themselves and the people they're trying to serve. They admitted that they began to feel angry with the very people they were dedicated to serving. As we discussed the victim dynamic, staff were better able to understand how and why such a mentality and personality develops; how it functions to "serve" the individuals; and **how to empower people to stop being victims**... as opposed to them becoming the latest Lollipop in a line of suckers!

### **"YOU'RE SO GOOD AT BEING HELPLESS!"**

Victim personalities seem to be highly incompetent. However, victim personalities are also extremely competent -- **they are competent in being victims!** Being victims has become a



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fairly effective way for them to gain power and control in their lives. Unfortunately, being competent as a victim and gaining power and control by being one also has significant negative consequences. A few years ago, a new client presented her many truly horrific experiences from childhood through adulthood. She had been depressed for many years even though she worked and got by day-to-day. A very strong and pervasive sense of helplessness emanated from her. She mentioned old and current family issues, a series of toxic relationships with abusive men, and an oppressive work situation. I could practically hear the violin music in the background! This may sound insensitive and flippant when a person is revealing the horrors and pain of her life. However, while we may be drawn empathetically to the victim, empathy alone will not help this person (or your child). She had been victimized in her life. She had power and control taken away from her. Most caring people would be drawn to try to help her -- to nurture her. In fact, her entire aura was drawing me to help her. Consciously, subconsciously, or unconsciously she was asking me to save her. As a helping professional, I was tempted to make a quick change into my "Gallant Knight" costume and ride to the rescue!

However, I did not want to support her helplessness... her being a victim. Instead after about 20 minutes of listening to her complain about her life, I said (in a straightforward but gentle tone) "You're so good at being helpless." She was quite shocked, "What!?!... What do you mean?" I had gotten her attention. She was used to being nurtured with the classic "Oh, poor baby" pattern, which would have **confirmed** her helplessness. Getting a caring person to take care of her out of sympathy was her power and control strategy. I wouldn't... couldn't disempower her. I continued, "You get a lot out of being depressed. You're very good at being a victim." Stunned, she said, "What do you mean?" I explained, "When you are depressed and helpless, people... especially your friends take care of you. When you look and sound like a miserable victim, people cut you a lot of slack and help you. You get a lot of power and control that way. By being hopeless, you avoid taking risks... avoid challenging yourself... you keep yourself in an uncomfortable (but familiar) world of quiet desperation. Being helpless works for you."

### THE DUEL THEORY OF FRAILTY

Wouldn't she fall apart -- be devastated? It would be difficult to take this approach if you believe in, what I call the "Duel Theory of Frailty." The first theory is that the person (child or adult) is too frail to handle the truth. On the other hand, giving someone the truth explicitly states you believe that **he/she is strong enough to deal with harsh realities**. I did not believe that she was frail -- nor, believe that children are inherently frail either. By challenging her (as I might challenge a child as well), I was stating that she had the strength to deal with the stressful implications of the truth. The second theory of frailty would be that my anxiety over her anxiety would be intolerable (i.e., I am too frail). I couldn't tell the truth if **I could not be okay with her not being okay**; with her not being okay (strong, resilient, resourceful, etc.) enough to go through the process of growth and change. My confidence, clarity, and skills in my role allowed me to take the risk of challenging her -- of stressing her. Parents require similar confidence, clarity, and skills to challenge their children as well... to avoid developing victim tendencies in their children.



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Her process was more complex than this. Eventually, she began to understand how her life experiences had led her into a pattern of hopelessness and helplessness -- of power and control gained through being a victim. She began to explore and experiment with healthier ways to gain power and control in her life. A true success story-- over the next 18 months, she worked on empowering herself, changing her work situation, taking numerous risks, and eventually meeting a nice guy, developing the relationship (with plenty of anxiety!), and becoming engaged. She stopped being a victim and is currently working on "happily ever after!"

What were the life experiences that developed the victim mentality for this adult? What was the process that helped her recover and grow into a healthier personality?





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### Chapter 23

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF VICTIMS- The Chicken and the Chicken Hawk

*La la la la... Where does this piece go? Hmmm... **What's that?** Is he coming this way? Oh... it's okay. La la la la... Hmmm... Huh? Oh oh... is he mad? Oh... no, just getting excited. Let's see... maybe the piece goes over here. La la... What? They're getting wild. Don't come over here... **Please**, stay over there... leave me alone! Whew! They went the other way. Uhh... what was I doing? Oh yeah... this piece goes... La la... What? Did he say my name? They talking about me? Oh no... they're looking this way... looking at me? No... no... not me. Leave me alone! Whew! They went over to Lucy. That was close. This piece goes... over... here... no... What? They **did** say my name. What are they going to do? He has that **look** again. Please, not me. No... **Please, not me again.** How come not Billy? or Sally? Why me? **Always** me?... **all** the time? Do somebody else. I try to be invisible... just leave me alone... I just want to do this puzzle. Why me? What's **wrong** with me? It must be something I do. I wish I wasn't so messed up... I don't want to play with you... you scare me. Don't you know you scare me? That I don't like you? You **do** know you scare me. You **do** know I don't like you. That's why you bother me. Please... please leave me alone... please... please please... here they come... somebody save me! **Some-bodee... save... me!** Please... please... help me! Please... **Oh noooooo!***

#### THE CHICKEN SPENDS ITS WHOLE LIFE...

A few years ago, I had 29-year-old female client who had horrible experiences from early childhood through adulthood. Male relatives had molested her in childhood. She had a series of painful relationships with toxic men. It seemed to her that bad things always happened to her -- that trouble seemed to seek her out... that she seemed to be the favorite victim for all the bullies in the world. With tremendous anguish, she cried out,

"Why me? Why always me? How do they find me all the time? It happens all the time. Just the other night... I went out to dinner with my grandma. We had to wait for a table, so we ordered some wine and sat at a small table in the bar. There I was... in baggy sweats, hair in a ponytail, no makeup... with my Granny! Just minding my own business waiting with Granny. Out of the corner of my eye... or, maybe it was just a certain kind of sound -- tone... or, maybe some kind of sixth sense... something... I looked up and there in the doorway was... trouble! It was a man. But not just a man. I knew right away that he was trouble -- big time."

How did she know with just one look that he was trouble? She knew because the chicken spends its whole life learning how to recognize the chicken hawk. The prey spends its entire life learning how to recognize the predators in their environment. When somebody feels so vulnerable to predators/abusers/bullies -- feels completely unable to protect themselves from exploitive people, then their only hope is to recognize the predator before it attacks and (hopefully) avoid it at all costs. She had become hypersensitive and hyper-vigilant in order to anticipate potential abusers. Unfortunately, this hypersensitivity and hyper-vigilance not only did not translate into avoiding victimization, they sometimes increased the possibility of



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harassment!

### THE CHICKEN HAWK SPENDS ITS WHOLE LIFE...

She had seen him before... not this man specifically, but she had seen him before... met him before. Dozens and scores of times before, she had met abusers like him. She had met bullies... other chicken hawks who had harmed her at different times in her life. In glint of his eyes... in the smirk that danced on his lips... in the posture of his body... she had seen the chicken hawk before... seen the predator before. A tremor crept into her voice,

"I turned my face away from him right away! To avoid any eye contact. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched him... standing in the doorway with his hands on his hips. Scanning the room... the predator scouting the herd. He looked around the room no more than three or four seconds. And, then... And, then... and, **then he walked right up to me!** And started harassing me! Why me? Why me **again?** Why me out of all those people... out of all those women in the room? A dozen other women... most of them dressed up... pretty makeup... a few sitting by themselves or with girlfriends. But he comes up to **me!** Me, in baggy sweats, hair in a pony tail, no makeup, **with my Granny!** Why me? How did he know out of all those women that I was the one? That I was the victim? How do they **always** know that I'm the one? The easiest and best one to abuse?"

How did that man know that she was the most vulnerable? The most fun to provoke, to manipulate... the most scared, the easiest to intimidate? He knew because the chicken hawk spends its whole life learning how to recognize the chicken! The predator spends its entire life learning how to recognize its prey... the prey that is the most vulnerable... that offers the least resistance... that is the least dangerous to the predator... the prey that is crippled. Predatory individuals seek power and control over the others. However, they are careful to aggress against only the weakest. Abusers know stronger individuals will resist and will fight back; they learn to leave them alone. They are too much trouble. Bullies learn how to recognize the easy prey. This man had picked up on her vulnerability with a quick scan of the room. He knew instinctively that she was the one he could intimidate. Like a cat playing with a captive mouse, he proceeded to play with his prey. Like a mouse, she felt trapped, helpless, and terrified.

The life of the victim is a miserable existence. When they aren't being picked on, they worry about if and when they will be picked on again. People (even close friends and family... even teachers and parents) eventually get frustrated with them -- even angry with them for being victims. Other people begin to avoid them. They become more and more isolated in their communities: the neighborhood, the office, the playground, the classroom, and the family. Life becomes extremely stressful. They may begin to hate any social situation. For some adults, it may contribute to agoraphobia. Some children come to hate going to school -- the school they used to love. Some children begin to have somatic problems -- the stomachaches, headaches, or other pain that gets Mommy or Daddy to keep them at home. As others get frustrated with them, subtle and not so subtle messages begin telling them that is their fault -- that something is wrong with **them** to be such a victim. Soon, they begin to believe that



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## **BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM**

something **is** wrong with them; that is their fault.

### **ANXIOUS VULNERABILITY**

The child who becomes a victim is often younger than the bully, more naturally sensitive, cautious, quiet, and anxious. They tend to have a negative view of violence (if you were the victim of violence all the time, **you'd** have a negative view too!) and are fairly non-aggressive in interactions. Their physical weakness (youth and/or size) and their anxiety set them up as potential targets. In of themselves, however, their sensitivity, aversion to violence, and non-aggressive natures could be positive social traits -- certainly traits that are supported and taught by many parents and teachers. Insensitivity, violent tendencies, and aggression, on the other hand are defining traits among bullies. Sensitive (healthy, non-victim) children are distinguished from victim personalities in that, victims tend to withdraw from confrontations of any kind and respond to confrontations (attacks) with crying. When faced with conflict, they are paralyzed with fear. They exhibit an "anxious vulnerability" that is easily recognized by bullies. It is as if over their head floats a flashing sign saying "**Attention all Bullies...Victim Here**".

In situations where there is not any conflict, they show anxious vulnerability anyway. In classroom situations, veteran teachers can easily identify potential victims because of their anxious vulnerability. I had been asked to evaluate the child described at beginning of this article. I did not know which child I was supposed to observe, nor had he been pointed out. However, from his anxious vulnerability -- his rabbit eyes, he was easily identifiable. While other children played freely, he played hesitantly with the puzzle. The other children didn't have a care in the world. He looked like an anxious rabbit-- tense and hyper-vigilant, wary that suddenly a fox or bear might step out of the forest, or an eagle or hawk swoop out of the sky.

### **PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE...**

Victim personalities' entire approach to conflict is passive. They are not assertive. They tend not to try to negotiate with others, persuade them, and make few or no demands, requests or even suggestions. Basically, they hope that things will get better ("please please please please please... come on, lucky lucky lucky... **please**"). Unfortunately, since they don't "make their luck," their reality often continues to be miserable. They don't initiate interactions but tend also to be passive in their play. Even as they mature beyond developmentally appropriate parallel play (three and under), they continue to play next to people rather than with them. In many ways they are socially incompetent -- not in a negative aggressive antisocial manner, but rather from being unable to socially and verbally negotiate and reciprocate social situations. They seldom have acting out problems in the family or in a preschool or playgroup. However, because they cannot handle aggression toward them... can't handle the situation by themselves, they always need to be rescued.

They end up feeling worse and worse... feeling more and more anxious... increasing their "anxious vulnerability," which leads to further targeting for victimization. They end up feeling ever more helpless and unable. By submitting, victims seem to reward the ego needs of the bullies. Consequently, the bullies return over and over to them to get satisfaction. Ironically,



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victims also seem to be drawn to the bullies. Adults tell children to avoid the abusive kids. However, victims seem to gravitate to bullies anyway. Why? The bully and the victim exist together at the bottom of the social status ladder. Everyone avoids both the bully and victim. Unable to be socially included and be involved with other children, victims often become socially isolated. They can become so desperately needy for attention that the negative attention of the bullies becomes desirable! Often they are left with only each other to interact with. Negative attention is experienced as better than no attention at all.

The potential for your child to develop a victim personality is a terrifying prospect for any parent. Many adults have their own issues from being bullied as children and/or even current experiences of being exploited. There are plenty of abusive individuals -- predators and bullies out there in the world. Fortunately, we can also identify the adult-child interactions that facilitate the development of a victim (and work to prevent it).



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### Chapter 24

#### HOW VICTIMS ARE CREATED

*Mommy and baby are going to the park. I love taking baby to the park. The sun... the grass... the sand... the swing... the other moms, and a few dads, and the occasional grandparent or babysitter... with our babies at Tot Land. An oasis in the urban desert. A peaceful place for babies... for my baby and me. No dishes, no bills, no news about this or that atrocity somewhere in the world... or in New York, Los Angeles... Colorado... Wyoming.*

*No ugliness here... just beautiful babies and their mommies and daddies. Mommies and daddies... Daddy didn't come. He was in a bad mood anyway. Baby didn't need to be around him. Ol' meany daddy... He said he was too busy. He wasn't too busy to go to the bar last night... or all those other nights. Oh, forget that. Mommy and baby are at the park. Everything is nice here. No angry daddies... no fights... fresh air and sunshine... me and baby... me and baby will always be together.*

*Anything you need... anything you'll ever need... I'll be there, I'll be there for you. Mommy will take care you, baby. Mommy will take care you in the big bad ugly world. But... we don't have to worry about that, do we? We're in Tot Land! Sunshine, grass, sand, swing, and other sweet babies... sweet babies, right? Just sweet babies. Right? Just beautiful sweet babies...*

#### THE VICTIM DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS -- THE PREDATOR STRIKES

While victims tend to be sensitive, nonviolent, and non-aggressive, all the children and people with these traits do not become victims. What differentiates what would be very positive personal traits for healthy social relationships from vulnerability to become a victim? Victim children also tend to have very close relationships with their parents. Oh no! Sounds like that same old "blame the mother" psychology! There was an extensive period in American psychological theory (approximately 1950s through 1960s, and still somewhat today), that blamed every problem -- emotional, psychological, interpersonal, social, and so forth on mothers having messed up their children. However, it is not the closeness of the relationship that causes the development of the victim personality, but **how** that closeness is expressed. The victim personality is developed through the good intentions of protective (and anxious!) parents gone awry. In protecting their children, these parents **actually prevent their children from developing the skills** (including assertiveness, negotiation, and compromise) to handle aggression and conflict -- to deal with bullies.

Little Jordan is in the sandbox at the Community Center Tot Land playground. He is eight months old. Mommy has brought him and his little red bucket and little blue shovel to play with the other little kids. The sand feels wonderful -- it's warm and flows through his fingers. Mommy shows him how to put sand in the bucket with the little shovel. It's fun. Little Darlene, 10 months old crawls over to Jordan. They look at each other. Jordan doesn't know Darlene. Is she okay? He looks at his mom for reassurance. Mom smiles at him and says, "Say hi to the little girl, Jordan." Mom starts talking to another lady that she knows from



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church. Jordan stares at the Darlene... he doesn't know what to do... Is it okay? Darlene looks at Jordan... she looks at his bucket... she looks at Jordan. Jordan doesn't know what to do. He just watches Darlene. Darlene looks at Jordan... looks at his bucket... looks at Jordan, and she reaches over and grabs his bucket! He holds it tighter, his eyes getting big... Darlene pulls harder. Tears form in Jordan's eyes. Darlene frowns and smiles at the same time... Jordan is getting scared. Darlene gives a big yank... Jordan gets pulled stomach down into the sand... and Darlene has the bucket! Jordan is in shock... nobody at home snatches things from him! Darlene has the bucket but she's still there watching him... a small smile on her face. It's not a pretty smile... it's not a nice smile... it's a **scary** smile! His lips begin to quiver. Jordan looks around. There's his mom. Wahhh!! **Wahhhh!! Waaahhhhhh!!** The predator has struck.

### NOW, THE SAVIOR STRIKES

Jordan has stepped outside his safe, nurturing, loving world. Darlene doesn't love him and won't do anything for him like Mommy... like Granny... like... Darlene just took his bucket and Jordan doesn't know what to do. This is the first of many crises that will shape Jordan's ability to deal with intrusion, aggression, bullying, or abuse. Jordan's mother turned suddenly at the sound of his desperate cry. Quickly she realizes what has happened -- some bully girl has just attacked (the vicious chickenhawk!)... just abused her little baby! Immediately, she springs into action. There are three paths that she might consider: first, to protect little Jordan from the bully, second, to let little Jordan handle it by himself, or third, to empower and train little Jordan how to deal with bullies. The danger here is that she may choose to protect Jordan and protect him as if he were truly frail -- as if he were actually in danger of disintegrating. As if having a bucket snatched away by another kid would be that destructive of his emotional and psychological being. If she thought that Jordan was that vulnerable, she would rush in, take the bucket away from Darlene and give it back to Jordan. "Here Jordan, poor sad baby. That mean little girl took your bucket. I got it back for you. Mommy made it okay for you. You're okay."

What's so wrong with this response? The problem is, in intervening and taking care of the conflict (mean ol' grabby Darlene!), Jordan gets the message that Mommy will rescue him. Unfortunately, this also implies that Jordan is incapable of taking care of this conflict on his own... that his skills, resources, and resiliency would not be sufficient enough for him to be able to take care of himself. His power and control in the situation (getting his bucket back) was **through crying, getting his mothers attention, and getting her to rescue him** (Jordan needs Mommy to rescue him). He had no direct control or power to resolve the situation. His mother's action is a powerful message (remember that nonverbal communication messages including behavior are very compelling. Nonverbal communication is more trusted and integrated than any words). In effect, her rescuing Jordan tells him louder than words, "You're **NOT** okay". Her actions tell him that he cannot handle the situation on his own and is vulnerable to harm.

### THE LOVING THIEF AND A SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

The greatest harm is when these messages become a self-fulfilling prophecy. By continually rescuing Jordan, Mommy (or Dad or teacher) becomes the loving thief. She not only



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inadvertently gives him over and over the message that he is incapable and vulnerable, but also **steals from him the opportunities** to learn how to handle conflict and to develop the resiliency to deal with stress. Jordan becomes more and more incapable because he never gets to practice and develop the skills necessary to handle conflict on his own. He becomes more and more vulnerable because he realizes both that Mommy must rescue him or he will suffer, **and** that Mommy will not and cannot always be available to save him. On his own, he realizes he is completely vulnerable to any bully that decides to come after him. He starts to become extremely vigilant in looking for potential abusers that might approach him. His "anxious vulnerability" increases and become ever the more obvious to predators looking for easy prey. It is often the parents' insecurities about their own vulnerability to harm that leads them to become overprotective. In other words... "I couldn't prevent what was done to me or is happening to me, but at least, I can keep it from happening to my child," or, "I can't let my baby feel the pain I felt... feel." The **parents'** anxious vulnerability expands to encompass their children.

It is not the closeness of the relationships between children and their parents that causes the development of the victim personality. It is when their parents' anxiety causes them to become overprotective rather than protective. Parents face the decision over and over whether or not their children need to be protected in any given situation. There will be times when your child definitely needs to be protected -- circumstances or individuals that he/she faces are too overwhelming and/or too dangerous for them to handle on their own. You would need to step in quickly and assertively. And, there will be times when it is very clear that your child is fully capable of taking care of his/her own needs. Here you can step back and observe your child's skills, resources, and resiliency. However, there will also be times when your child will be stressed -- when it will be difficult, even agonizing for them to deal with a situation or individual. They will be greatly challenged and stretched in order to succeed (or even to try and still fail). If you step in immediately, you steal from them the opportunity to be challenged and to be stretched and still succeed, **or** even to fail, but to survive. Parents best serve their children not by only protecting them, but to also by encouraging, training, and empowering. You cannot do this if you are unable to let go... if you can't stand watching your child struggle, even suffer in order to build the skills and resiliency necessary to handle stress, conflicts, and intrusive or abusive or exploitative people, including bullies.

*Jordan, that little girl took your bucket. You don't look happy. Is that okay? No? Okay, then take it back. Darlene, Jordan wants his bucket back. Darlene, Jordan wants you to give it back to him. Next time you want the bucket, ask for it first, Darlene. Maybe Jordan will let you have it soon. Jordan, get your bucket. Get your bucket... Mommy won't get it for you. You need to get it. Darlene will give back to you (a firm glance at Darlene would be useful here!). Tell Darlene, "No." You need help? Here's Darlene. Put your hand on the bucket. Hold on (if necessary, close your hand around his hand on the bucket). Okay? Now, pull it away. There you go! You did it! Good job, you got your bucket. What do you want to do with your bucket now? You want to put sand in it? You want to let Darlene play with it? Or, play together with Darlene? **You** decide.*



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Empowerment, empowerment, empowerment. Empowerment is a key to developing self-esteem. Competency is a key as well. Competency can not be learned without the opportunity to learn. Grit your teeth and clench your fists! Giving children the opportunity to learn depends largely on you handling your own fears for your children. If you can do this, then you can empower them by giving them the opportunities to become competent. If you can't, then you will steal from them the opportunities **and** disempower them, building incompetence and vulnerability. Being competent in taking care of oneself -- in dealing with bullies and other hurtful people and situations contribute to higher self-esteem.

Frustrated parents dealing with difficult children may inadvertently promote them into becoming abusive and bullies. In addition, following chapter will explain how and why bullies bully as the means to establish their self-esteem and how adults can redirect the process towards a healthier outcome.





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### Chapter 25

#### DEVELOPING YOUR OWN BULLY

##### PARENT SAYS AND DOES

- Ollie, turn off that TV and go do your homework.
- Oliver, I **said** turn off that TV and do your homework.
- **Oliver Daniel Duntz!!** You better turn off that damn TV and get your behind to your room and do your homework!!
- **OLIVER!! I SAID GET YOURSELF AWAY FROM THE STUPID BOOB TUBE!! YOU HEAR ME BOY?**
- **If you don't get in your room to do your homework by the time I count to 3, you're going to be sorry!**
- One, Two...**THREE!!** (Eyes widen & nose flares)
- **WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU? GET YOUR BEHIND OUTTA HERE!! HOW MANY TIMES DO I NEED TO TELL YOU!?!?**
- **OLIVER!!! THAT'S IT!!** (The parent jumps up, storms over to Oliver, and snatches him up by the arm while smacking him hard on the bottom)
- **THAT'S WHAT YOU GET FOR IGNORING ME!!**

##### CHILD HEARS AND EXPERIENCES

- Ollie, blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah.
- Oliver, blah **blah** blah blah blah blah blah blah.
- **Oliver Daniel Duntz!!** (*huh?*) Blah blah blah blah blah Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah!
- **OLIVER!!** (*Geez, I can't hear the TV w/ all that yelling!*) **BLAH, BLAH BLAH!! YOU HEAR ME BOY?** (*no*)
- **Blah blah blah...by the time I count to 3...(yeah right, 1 2 3... oooo, big deal!) blah blah blah going to be sorry!**
- One, Two...**THREE!!** (*I'm watching TV!!*)
- **WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU?** (*What's wrong with YOU!?! Dang, can't a watch a little TV! Go away... How many times? Too many times!!*)
- **OLIVER!!! THAT'S IT!!** (*What!? What's s/he doing!?! Hey... hey! Watch out... Hey!! Ow my arm!)* **OW!! OW!! S/he's attacking me!!**
- **THAT'S WHAT YOU GET FOR IGNORING ME!!** (*whaaat!?*)

Who are these bullies? Of course, some bullies are clearly the children of bullies -- of parents who are abusive and aggressive to everyone. Such adults tend to be hostile and aggressive in how they deal with everyone. Intimidating others feels not only appropriate but also desirable. And, I also doubt that they would be caught dead reading this article! Or, perhaps the non-bully half of the couple may read this (often a victim of the bullying as well). Their children have exact models that they can emulate as bullies. On the other hand, there are children who become bullies whose parents are well intended and loving. And, who are these children's first victims? Often, their own parents!! Just as we discussed in the previous article, that sometimes parents inadvertently ironically, they "love" their children into becoming victims. Parents' love mixed with misunderstanding of



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their children's personalities and needs, can also result children becoming bullies. Before we examine this dynamic, let us first define what the bully is.

### **BULLIES, AGGRESSION, AND THE SEARCH FOR SELF-ESTEEM**

It takes tremendous courage to for a parent to admit that his/her child may be a bully. It is often more comfortable to be in denial. Freud said that all defense mechanisms (including denial) are to avoid anxiety that would otherwise be overwhelming. To consider that your beloved baby purposely and joyfully hurts others would cause overwhelming anxiety for any loving parent. However, if a parent understands how intensely his/her child will suffer for the bullying behavior, it may give him/her motivation to face reality... and then work to move the child into healthier processes of relating.

The problems for a bully (the problems the bully him/herself experiences) start early in preschool, if not earlier in his/her own family. His/her behavior creates not only misery for others, but also for him/herself. The bully is a victim (to poor parenting and/or an abusive parent), but also he/she becomes a victim to his/her own behavior and reputation. The damages to his/her own well-being last decades. The bully's victims often can move on to healthier, safer, more productive, and rewarding relationships. However, the bully hurts him/herself the most. From early on, the bully experiences a consistent downward spiral in life. The bullying behavior ends up harming learning, friendships, work, intimacy, income, and mental health. A bully is much more likely to become an anti-social adult: have criminal problems, become a batterer, become a child abuser, and tragically produce more bullies in next generation.

No one likes the bully. People important to the bully don't like the bully. As a consequence, the bully gets few if any messages of significance from caretakers and their peers. Despite his/her distorted self-image, negative social sanctions for his/her negative behavior continually tells the bully that he/she has failed to live up to his/her ideal self. He/she loses power and control as he/she is continually restricted because of the negative behavior. There is a multitude of issues that a bully may have in terms of learning disabilities, temperamental challenges, the emotional disturbances, and so forth that make it very difficult for him/her to experience success academically or socially. Certainly, the bully is socially incompetent. Significance, messages of worth from those who are significant to you; moral virtue, being able to live up to one's own value system; power and control, how much one is in charge of his/her own life; and competence, ones skills in the areas that are important to oneself -- in all the four components of self-esteem, the bully comes up short. The bully's low self-esteem becomes motivation to create a false sense of worth based on aggression.

### **"WHO ARE YOU LOOKING AT!?"**

The bully has a hostile attributional bias – a kind of paranoia where he/she perceives provocation where it doesn't exist. "Who are you looking at!?" "Stop trying to screw with me!" People are often stunned ("What!?) to find themselves the target of hostility from a bully about something they did not do or did innocently. The paranoia distorts the bully's



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perception and interpretation of innocent comments and behavior. He/she just knows that the other person is going to do him/her wrong. The bully does not see him/herself negatively. It is too great a threat to his/her fragile self-esteem to admit that. And as a result, feels completely justified in being aggressive and hurtful against the other person. Hostility and aggression is the only way to relate to others. Such behavior makes him/her feel powerful. Most importantly, the bully **experiences aggression as working**. It gets him/her the last cookie, the new toy, first place in line, quicker service, and silence from the intimidated (which he/the interprets as permission). A bully can think of only one the short-term outcome, and fails to see long term. "If it gets me the remote control right now - - good! So, stupid sister is mad. So what? She'll get even with me? Hate me? When we grow up? Who cares? Ha! **I got the remote control!**" Such behavior -- "successes" serves to build upon the bully's fragile sense of self-esteem. It becomes his/her only way to have any semblance of self-esteem. The bully gradually gets locked into patterns of aggressive and hostile responses. With the male bully, he becomes acceptable only to those like him. More and more the male bully will be isolated from the community to hang out with and socialize only with other bullies. This is a primary reason why bullies eventually run in packs or as a gang. It is somewhat different for girls and women because of gender role differences that will be discussed in the next article.

### "HUH? WHAT?... WHAAAT!!!?"

Sometimes marginally skilled parents come up against a "difficult" child. Some children (and adults) have more intense and problematic personalities. With good parenting, sensitivity, and appropriate boundaries, such difficult children often become absolutely wonderful adults. However, they take special attention that some parents, unfortunately, are unable to provide because of their own issues: economic stress, relationship difficulties, poor models of parenting, and/or a poor temperamental match between themselves and their children. The scenario is as follows: the parent requests and the child is noncompliant -- simply put, the child doesn't do what the parent has asked. "Huh? What?" Initially, the noncompliance may have been from inattention, being preoccupied, or a test of the parents' frustration level. The noncompliance eventually becomes purposeful. The noncompliance becomes essentially aggressive behavior against the parents. The parent asks again and is ignored again. This may happen over and over. Eventually the parent loses it. "If you don't., I'm going... I'm going..." There is more yelling and everything intensifies. The child is controlling the parent by his noncompliance. Finally, the parent gets so upset at the back talk and noncompliance that he/she strikes out and hits the child. Some parents never hit the child. Instead, they insult the child with the emotional and psychological blows -- "I don't know what's wrong with you!" "I wish you were never born!" "You're just like your damn father!" And, the child responds with outrage, "WHAAAT!!!?"

The noncompliance goes unpunished until the parent is so full of hostility that s/he lashes out unpredictably. Highly frustrated, the parent makes ever increasingly severe threats but doesn't follow through consistently. Sometimes a consequence or punishment follows immediately. Other times, there's no consequence or punishment at all. Other times it happens after a short period -- sometimes after a long period. Sometimes the consequence



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or punishment is rather mild. Sometimes it is so severe as to be legally considered child abuse. The inconsistent use of ineffective punishment winds up intermittently rewarding defiance. Many times being defiant is experienced as been successful. After all, "I got to more television." "They usually give in." "I get it all time. Yeah, I get wacked a few times. I don't care." "My parents are afraid of me! I'm the boss!" With the expectation that the defiance will be successful proves false at times, instead of learning that defiance is inappropriate, the child feels that he/she has been treated unfairly. The expectation develops that others will treat him/her unfairly and unpredictably.

The use of physical punishment as a solution **teaches that aggression is the appropriate solution.** In addition, the punishment is presented with **intense retaliatory feelings.** Deeply frustrated, the parent will often strike out with self-righteous rage blaming the child for the physical punishment that he/she is receiving. "I **told** you to stop!" "It's your fault you got hit. You didn't listen to me!" "That's what you get for being so bad!" The child who already has tendencies to be to be aggressive, not only gets a model of punishment that is aggressive but also a model of self-righteous retaliation as appropriate. The punishment also creates resentment that directs the child toward even greater aggression against others. The child's anti-social behavior is reinforced, and prosocial behavior is neither modeled or reinforced. The issues are not resolved by sitting down, talking, exploring motivations and emotions, seeking to affirm needs in the context of social reciprocal relationships, and so forth.

### **UNCARED FOR & UNABLE TO CARE**

As parents get more and more frustrated with their children, and as they are sometimes intimidated anticipating the battle that they face disciplining their child, they often pull back and let them get away with more and more. In addition, the lack of compliance by the child -- the not needing to comply because the parent is not following through, is actually experienced by the child as the parent **not caring.** As much as the child may want to be in control in the short-term, at a deeper level he/she knows that if he/she is in control and the parents are out of control, something is very wrong. Life becomes very scary. However, the child is unable to articulate this. All he/she can do is continue to be aggressive and hurtful. As the bully is immersed in his/her own insecurity, he/she doesn't...**can't think about other people feelings.** A bully is unable to have empathy... unable to experience connection to other people's feelings.

Wow! Sounds scary! And discouraging? However, there's a lot that can be done to break this dynamic. We will get to this, but first we will explore more issues about bullies including gender differences in bullying behavior and the ineffective bully.