BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

Chapter 26

YOU CAN'T COME TO MY BIRTHDAY PARTY

You're not my best friend.

You're not my best friend anymore!

You can't come to my birthday party.

You can't play with us.

We don't like you... we don't want to play with you!

Come on girls. Let's go. There's something smelly here! (Meaningful look at the victim)

Thousands, if not millions of women remember extremely painful experiences from as early as their preschool years, to their elementary school years, and often with the greatest trauma in the middle school or high school years. Certainly, hundreds of women I have spoken to in trainings agree! Often, when people talk about bullying they think in terms of physical attacks and confrontations typical of male bullying. Sometimes, people fool themselves into thinking that girls don't bully. Girls definitely can and do bully. However, they tend to bully in different style than boys.

Male bullying style tends to follow the style of male social dynamics. Much of the male social interactions are based on the struggle for a place in the hierarchy of the group -- being the "king of the hill", being the best, having the most, and being the alpha male. Physical aggression and domination, often in competitions, establish the hierarchy. In arguably more functional and healthy male groups, the hierarchy is established with a place for each member of the group: there is an alpha, a beta, and subsequently lower ranked members. There may be ongoing struggles to maintain rank or to ascend the hierarchy. However, there is a place for each member, and each member is more or less respected and valued. A member who is low in the hierarchy is still a member of the team, and his contribution to the group is still appreciated. Self-esteem can still be developed. A boy low on the hierarchy who shows competence or is successful in some status-gaining process will be respected and ascend the hierarchy. In the healthiest groups, all members promote and celebrate the increased competence of any member of the group. Wouldn't that be wonderful if it were always true?

However, in the bully dynamic, there is tremendous energy to purposefully keep other people down -- to keep them victims. Self-esteem (and his place in the hierarchy) for a member is based on the respect of the others in the group for his relative competence. However, the bully's self-esteem is based on putting down or destroying the self-esteem of others. Rather than respect, fear is what the bully gains. The aggressiveness to show competence and establish hierarchy in more functional male groups is distorted to

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

become the need to destroy others for a sense of status for the bully. The bully in the normal hierarchy is actually at or near the bottom socially. Unable to be respected or liked, the bully settles for being feared. Aggression becomes intimidation. Competition for a place in the hierarchy becomes bullying for an illusion of power and control. The physical aggression and competition expressed in games and sports becomes the physical and hurtful exploitation, intimidation, and domination of bullying. "Winning" has to include destroying others emotionally and psychologically. Later, we will talk about the subculture of bullies where there is a hierarchy of bullies as well.

WE DON'T LIKE YOU…!!
The social dynamic for girls and women tend to have a different cultural framework than for boys and men. Whereas, the hierarchy is the foundation to the culture of boys and men, inclusion in and consequently, exclusion from the group is a key to the culture of girls and women traditionally. The lesser power women have held traditionally, has moved women to turn to each other for social interaction and support. The training of men to become "warriors" resulted in men becoming emotionally unavailable to women. Women turned to each other to fulfill emotional needs that might have otherwise been met with their male partners. As men held the greater power in their communities because of the physical difference between men and women, women could not overtly assert power and control in the same manner as men. Their influence by necessity had to be more covert – that is, through men or through the community of women. We will expound these theories in the next chapter.

The relationship between women in female groups becomes the determining factor in social status. Intimacy between members of the group is seen as the greatest value. Sharing their feelings and fears with one another becomes a way to bond together (even in the supermarket checkout line with total strangers!) -- to bond together counter their relatively less powerful position as opposed to men. Being included in a group was critical to the emotional and psychological survival of a woman (especially if her male partner with the emotionally unavailable due to his "warriors" training or football season). As a result, exclusion from the group of was tantamount to being emotionally set adrift or abandoned in the wilderness. The bullying style of girls and women becomes about "relational aggression." Hurting others by damaging or manipulating their relationships becomes the way to bully. Spreading rumors, negative gossip, telling others to stop liking someone, withdrawal of friendship, social exclusion, and the silent treatment become the methods to keep each other in line, to assert status, and to build self-esteem for the female bully.

Parents and preschool teachers see this beginning as early as three or four years of age: "You're not my best friend." "You're not my best friend anymore!" "You can't come to my birthday party." "You can't play with us." "**We** don't like you.. **we** don't want to play with you!" Little girls are devastated. Fortunately, most children are resilient and with the correct feedback from the adults, the hurtful behavior can be stopped. Unfortunately, some parents and teachers feel that they cannot tell children who should be their friends.

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

However adults definitely do need to tell children that they cannot be cruel in choosing friends or in excluding non-friends. Children and adults with a sense of social responsibility and empathy will make their choices and follow-through in appropriate (kind) ways. However, there are those who will purposely (or carelessly) be hurtful as they make their choices… who will make sure the excluded person feels the ostracizing deeply and is isolated without recourse… who will even delight in the pain that the excluded feels.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN… "WE?"
When I was running preschool programs, sometimes a little girl (let's call her Kelli) would try to gather her little covey of girls and purposefully exclude another girl by saying, "Let's go. We don't like Joanie." The three other little girls would probably go along with Kelli. They were held under the influence of Kelli strong personality… perhaps intimidated by her aggressiveness. Kelli was relishing her domination of the three girls and of Joanie. Her self-esteem was bolstered by this cruel dynamic. There are times when adults clearly recognize that a behavior is vicious and harmful: a stick poked towards the eye or a vulgarity putting someone down. And, at such times, adults will usually act strongly and affirmatively to set a clear boundary and an appropriate consequence.   However, sometimes adults disable themselves in failing to recognizing such an act by Kelli as being as vicious and damaging (if not more so and longer term), and fail to act as strongly and as affirmatively as would be appropriate.

I stepped in immediately, "Kelli, you are on time out. You're trying to hurt Joanie on purpose. No one is allowed to hurt others on purpose at our school. Sit down here." The basic rules of the community (family, class, school, society) are enforced—you may be a part of the community only if you not harm yourself, others, or the process of the community. Letting Kelli indulge <u>and</u> be rewarded (with status or power) from this act, would set up Kelli to continue to bully others in the future. This would lead to a dismal future for her (and her future victims). Then I asked Kelli and her gang, "What do you mean… '**we**?' You girls trying to be mean to Joanie too? Do you need to be on timeout for being mean on purpose to Joanie too!?" At this, I invariably hear a chorus of, "Oh no! **We** like Joanie!!" I would then respond, "Oh you do? Then why don't you take Joanie and go play together?" "OK! Come on, Joanie… let's play!" And off they would go… leaving Kelli behind on timeout, **BUSTED!!** Her attempt at bullying through exclusion has been met with a clear boundary and consequence from the adults, and also been turned around into a positive cultural model for the children. Too often, kids like Kelli are allowed to succeed in bullying and intimidating other children to do her cruel bidding. It is up to adults to make sure this social experimentation turns out negatively for the budding bully. As girls get older and move into pre-adolescence and adolescence, it becomes more difficult to intervene in this dynamic. This is why it is so important to be vigilant when they are younger…especially if you are the parent of a girl with a strong personality.

THE WORSE OF BOTH

Ronald Mah, M.A., Ph.D.
Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, MFC32136
Psychotherapy, Parent Education, Consulting & Staff Development
433 Estudillo Ave., #305, San Leandro, CA 94577-4915
(510) 614-5641 Office - (510) 889-6553 fax - E-mail: Ronald@RonaldMah.com - Web: www.RonaldMah.com

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

There is a person (seen primarily in the male groups) called the Reactive Bully, an ineffective aggressor who has anything but a strong personality who gets the worse of being both the bully and the victim. He is an ineffective bully who is unable to be socially successful with other children. This person ends up stuck socializing with the other bullies but is not able to handle the aggression of the other bullies effectively. He gets angry very easily and will escalate relatively minor conflicts into aggressive situations. However, since he hangs out with bullies, as he escalates the interaction into a confrontation, the more aggressive and intimidating alpha bullies provoke, threaten, and intimidate him. He is unable to calm himself once conflict begins. He often becomes more unsuccessfully aggressive. He gets overwhelmed and is forced to back down. He becomes their victim. As he backs down, he tends to whine (even cry) and complain overtly and sullenly to himself.

As his temperament and male macho bravado brings him to confront and then back down over and over, he becomes fun to tease… he is extremely entertaining for the other bullies to provoke over and over. As he is teased and bullied by more powerful bullies, his sense of powerlessness and resentment grows. Unable to assert himself successfully among the bullies, he becomes more likely to assert himself with others. With adults, he becomes more likely than ever to be oppositional and defiant… perhaps, passive aggressively. With other children, he can become increasingly dangerous as he looks to intimidate them in order to find some way to build up his highly fragile insecure self-esteem. No one likes this bully. He becomes the least liked individual in the entire social group. He gets both the highly negative social consequences of the bully (anti-social behavior, poor academics, crime, and so forth) and the internalized negative consequences of the victim (anxiety and depression).

How does the ineffective aggressor come to be? The major characteristic of the reactive aggressor is their highly volatile and easy to provoke emotions. Such an individual has not ever learned how to regulate his/her emotions relative to social demands. This is one of the primary (if not the primary) points of the current emphasis on developing Social-Emotional Intelligence in children. Psychologist Gary W. Kraemer's research on monkeys reared either with their mothers, or by humans and later with monkey peers only, suggests there is a strong caretaker nurturing component that may also affect brain chemistry. Kraemer feels good or poor caregiving changes the chemistry of the brain, which affects social emotional behavior. "To the degree that caregivers are unpredictable, random, and asynchronous, then social behavior is not likely to internally regulated." Basically, I interpret this to mean that children need stable and consistent nurturing and discipline… especially temperamentally challenging children. Parents, sometimes because of their own trials and challenges are unable to consistently monitor and regulate… to teach their children how to successfully manage their own emotions and needs in social contexts. Left on their own, the more emotionally subdued children can become depressed. On the other hand, left on their own and immersed in their emotional turmoil with their emotional reactivity, some of the other kids become the reactive bullies. Good versus poor parenting again is the key to healthy and successful individuals.

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

Next is a fascinating theory that both explains and frees us from historical, societal, and cultural gender stereotypes. I believe it is essential in the development of self-esteem to recognize the origins of the gender stereotypes. Children are often asked to live up to confining cultural gender stereotypes that are personally inauthentic. This can break down self-esteem.

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

Chapter 27

FROM 30%- ORIGINS OF MALE-FEMALE DIFFERENCES
And Modern Changes and Challenges

A LITTLE GENDER QUIZ

1) For American men, from childhood, many are encouraged to do what the most? For American women?
> *A) cooperate*
> *B) have the most or be the best*
> *C) have close friends*
>> D) serve community needs

2) What way do American women prefer to <u>get</u> presents? What way do American men tend to <u>give</u> presents?
> *A) one large expensive present every few months*
> *B) small inexpensive presents every week or so*
> *C) a few meaningful presents spread over a year*

3) What do most American women want from men when they complain about a problem at work? What do men tend to do?
> *A) try to help their wives find a solution to the problem*
> *B) let their wives know that they feel sorry for them*
> *C) they let their wives know that they feel their feelings*

4) When an American man is depressed, who is he <u>least</u> likely to go to for reassurance? For a woman, who is she most likely to go to?
> *A) spouse, partner, or lover*
> *B) father, brother, or other male relative*
> *C) a male friend*
> *D) a female friend*
> *E) sister, mother, or other female relative*
> <u>F) all of the above</u>

Are the answers obvious to you? Stepping aside from "political correctness", and acknowledging the powerful cultural/social forces we (and our children) experience are the first steps to improving equal opportunities for all. And, for relieving our children from limitations to their humanity based on archaic gender stereotypes. Fortunately, many people are actively promoting children to explore the totality of their potentials without restriction by gender. However, the questions above tend to have a "juicy" aspect to them since they do bring up seemingly relevant stereotypes. Yet, there are many people who clearly have transcended them and live lives according to their own

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

authenticity. In the last article, I discussed the differences between male and female bullying styles. These differences come from the stereotypes. The stereotypes came from historical, anthropological, and socio-economic realities in the world. Moreover, the world has changed in ways that has facilitated major changes in gender roles and portend eventual even greater gender equality in the future. I will present a fascinating theory that offers explanations for gender differences historically and implies the change society is currently undergoing for boys and girls, men and women. But first, the "answers" to the questions! (Made you wait!)

DANIEL BOONE, CUSTER, JOHN WAYNE, LEWIS and CLARK, J.P. MORGAN, ROCKY, SUPERMAN, MUHAMMAD ALI, MICHAEL JORDAN…
  1) **For men, be the best or have the most (B); for women, have lots of friends (C)**
  2) **For women, getting many presents (B); for men, giving a big expensive present (A)**

In American history, aggressive selfish acquisition and goals of preeminence have historically fostered creativity and growth- opening frontiers of space, energy, resources, and power (as well as other less positive consequences). Since much of male culture fosters having the most and being the best (the king of the hill, "he has the most toys, wins!"), men who are culturally egocentric will assume others including their wives, have the same values. As a result, a man may be prone to giving the expensive gift as symbolic of the degree of affection he feels for his female partner. This large or expensive present creates **credit** for the next three months, and covers the **debt** from the last three months when he hadn't done anything (been a jerk!)!! Men who have trained to emotionally disconnected, to be emotionally stoic, and/or especially to avoid gentle expressions, which create vulnerability, often fail to consistently give messages of worth and incur significant emotional debt. When he realizes that he has been negligent in making continual messages of worth and valuing, he attempts to compensate for it in a type of bottom line accounting. A big gesture, the more expensive and grandiose the better, brings the affection quotient back into the black- or so he believes. However, his wife or girlfriend who may do her accounting differently- focusing instead on the number of days in the red and existing with a deprivation of worthiness, may have loss trust in his emotional reliability. And subsequently, may spurn his attempts to give the love she wishes. Too late!

If every gift or action of attention is a confirmation of your worth to the giver, how often do you want such messages? All the time, of course!! Girls and women in American culture are usually socialized to provide intimacy and rapport for each other ("You're my best friend"). Letting each other know that their feelings are understood and appreciated creates a strong bond among girls and women. This search for emotional support from other females is in part due to the emotional unavailability of boys and men socialized to avoid the gentle emotions… emotions contra-indicated to the warrior mentality. In addition, girls and women tend express the same messages of worth to boys and men, filling the males' needs for esteem… that is until the females become sick and tired of not getting reciprocal messages. Then, watch out!

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

3) Women want empathy (C); Men try to problem solve (A)

Seeking help from another person is considered by some individuals as assuming an inferior hierarchal position. An insecure person or a person trapped unwillingly in a lesser power position, may resent others assuming a higher hierarchal position. This may be too painfully familiar to some women in their relationships with their male partners (trained to be the best). When a woman complains and her husband assumes the problem solving position, it may stir up resentment that adds to her previous upset. Having someone feel sorry for you (sympathy) can be experienced as being pitied as less competent or powerful. On the other hand, empathy (a feeling with) fundamentally assumes a relationship of equity. From a psychological perspective, receiving acknowledgement of ones vulnerable feelings translate to validating of ones inherent worth.   This serves intimacy and camaraderie, which is essential for "having lots of friends."

American boys and men are usually socialized to be problem solvers. With a stereotypical division of labor with the man being the warrior, hunter, and specifically, the provider; and the woman being the child caregiver and domestic laborer, male love is expressed in providing and problem solving, while female love is expressed in overt acts of nurturing and care giving: hugs, verbal phrase, empathy. Being a proper boy or man, unfortunately entails shutting down what is presented as "sissy" emotions and behaviors- the very emotions and behaviors required for intimacy. Often, women (and men often too) become frustrated at men's difficulties being in close relationships of emotional vulnerability. "But I can fix the toilet!"

4) For men, no way, not another guy! (C); For women, anyone! (F)

Going to someone for reassurance when depressed means allowing oneself to expose ones vulnerability. Exposing yourself to another may be dangerous. He may be your rival having been socialized to being the best, which includes being better than you. He may use the vulnerability you have revealed for a competitive an advantage in some battle of acquisition or dominance- for a job or a girlfriend for example. I have observed this with elementary school boys (and in adult men in sports) who will taunt and humiliate another male who dares to admit he likes a girl or enjoys "sissy" games or toys. The response from the humiliated would often be to attempt to shame the accuser by attacking some vulnerability of his… to get back This would happen among individuals who were otherwise good friends.   As the dis'n continues, the contestants utilize even more humiliating attacks, until they came to physical blows, or one loses and drops in status- the best has been established. Being "tough" and suffering silently becomes the only option. Remember in an earlier article, the little boy hit in the face by a soccer ball who was told by his father that he was ok? Basic man training.

Reaching out is normal in female socialization- intimate mates or partners also qualify. By offering ones vulnerable feelings, one implicitly honors the other person as worthy of trust- that is the other person is a good trustworthy person. "Because you are worthy of my trust, I can offer you my vulnerability and trust you to honor it." When someone offers you his or her vulnerability and you honor it, and you reciprocate by offering your own

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

vulnerability, then true intimacy and connectiveness is achieved. Girls and women are trained to do this to build relationships. It is also a compensatory method to gain power and influence through the group in a culturally gender skewed power dynamic. Which is why girls bond through group inclusion and bully through exclusion from the group.

THE "VIKING" THEORY OF GENDER DIFFERENCES
While there is significant growth from these stereotypes, there is a ring of lingering truth to them as well. Left unexamined, they are strictly stereotypes not about how things have been but also about how they are or **must be**. Boys and girls, men and women are not doomed to live out these stereotypes, nor are they less masculine or less feminine if they do not. The stereotypes have validity because they come from people dealing with particular historical survival realities. However, as current and evolving societal realities have created new parameters for survival, to an ever evolving degree, we are being freed from the stereotypes. The following theory is derived primarily from Jonathan Kramer, Ph.D. and Diane Dunaway in "Why Men Don't Get Enough Sex and Women Don't Get Enough Love," Simon and Schuster, 1990.

It is believed that over six thousand years ago, men and women lived fairly egalitarian lives (Fred & Wilma Flintstone pretty equal?). The physical difference between men and women necessitated by the woman's physiology required to bear children results in an approximately 30% lesser strength in women compared to men of approximately the same size. This difference in physical strength was not great enough to define- to skew the power relationship between men and women. While there could be significant role differences because of the strength differences, survival for the family and the community still depended primarily on cooperation between mates. The males greater physical strength (primarily upper body) was an advantage, but in of itself insufficient to meet the physical demands of survival of the family and of the community. Cooperation- a pooling of both male and female strengths was necessary for survival given the lack of labor saving technology: to farm, hunt, gather, build, and so forth. Subsequently for survival, there was a more egalitarian balance of power between men and woman. Finding a cooperative, mutually dependent individual to be your mate for both men and women was the key to survival. Survival was tenuous and any lack of cooperation between mates further jeopardized the family (and community).

This all changed, however, with the advent of the marauding peoples such as the Vikings, the Kurgans, Tartars, Mongols, and Zulus. Instead of based on hunting, fishing, gathering, agriculture, or commerce, these peoples' economy was based on attacking and plundering other communities resources. As a result, the survival of the family and of the communities became based not on cooperation between mates, but upon having strong powerful men who could fight off the raiders. The relationship between men and women skewed fundamentally at this point. Women's survival became dependent on being attached to a physically powerful man. Failure to attract such men would endanger the women's security.

Ronald Mah, M.A., Ph.D.
Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, MFC32136
Psychotherapy, Parent Education, Consulting & Staff Development
433 Estudillo Ave., #305, San Leandro, CA 94577-4915
(510) 614-5641 Office - (510) 889-6553 fax - E-mail: Ronald@RonaldMah.com - Web: www.RonaldMah.com

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

The consequences of this societal change continue to the present. The multi-billion dollar cosmetics and fashion industry, the beauty pageants, and so forth are the current manifestations of a continued premium upon females making themselves attractive to potential mates. Little girls such as Jon Benet Ramsey are taught from childhood to accentuate physical beauty. Going to college to major in "finding a husband" defines a woman's success/survival not on her own intelligence or skills but upon connecting with a powerful male (doctors and lawyers preferred!). In addition, male members of the community who fight off the marauders must be socialized to accentuate the traits of violence and warfare and to minimize or eliminate contrary traits. Thus physical prowess and intellectual dexterity are encouraged. Anger and a disconnection from gentle feelings- nurturing feelings, sensitivity, and empathy is promoted. "No pain, no gain," "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." Male stoicism serves warfare. Unfortunately it also disserves intimacy between male and female mates- a continued problem in modern America. As a couples therapist, I see this dynamic harm many relationships. Love remains a basic emotion, but when combined with anger and the violence promoted in "manhood" games and the disconnection from gentle feelings results in a continued modern social phenomenon- domestic violence. A man beating and even killing the one he loves is all too common in our society.

There are other theories including those biological theories that serve to explain gender differences. This provocative theory based primarily on the 30% difference in physical strength between the average man and woman explains traditional gender differences. However, changes in technology have virtually eliminated the 30% difference in strength. Arguably, there is not a single occupation (aside from those directly related to physically bearing children) that the physical difference between men and women still continue to exclude women. Advances in technology have continually served to remove physical strength as a criteria for work: power tools replacing hand tools; weapons of destruction (including mass destruction) replacing physical combat; forklifts, bulldozers, trucks, and the like replacing back breaking physical labor alone; electronic means of communication such as mass media and computers replacing the Pony Express! With these technological advances, the economic dependence of women upon male partners diminished as women manipulate the tools of work efficiently and effectively. In addition, legal, financial, academic, and other advances in societal protections and access (arguably also consequences of technological progress) further reduce or eliminate dependence on a "warrior" male partner. Your girls **can** do anything! And, your boys better get used to it!

RESISTANCE & UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGES
There remains significant societal and cultural resistance to these changes… individuals and groups who advocate "traditional" roles for males and females and find the evolution of gender roles uncomfortable or even immoral. There has always been evolution of gender and other roles over time as technological advances affect society and culture. However, the speed and intensity of technological advances the past fifty to hundred years is unprecedented in human history. Simply put, as a society we are not prepared or experienced to adapt so quickly… literally in the span of years to decades versus in the

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

span of hundreds or thousands of years! A case can be made that the advances in the past fifty years have exceeded all advances prior in human history, creating unprecedented challenges to us all. One example is the expected lifespan of individuals being in the mid-thirties during medieval times, to about 47 years at the beginning of the 1900's, to about 76-77 years at the beginning of the new millennium. This challenges us to find new ways to deal with gender dynamics, the elderly who live longer than ever before, and with teenagers who are teenagers for longer than ever before! Traditional responses often come up short because these are often new non-traditional challenges never experienced before. So, you mean we have to make it up as we go!? Yup! Sometimes traditional responses work, sometimes they need to be adapted, and sometimes, new approaches are needed. (Darn, you were hoping for an easy answer!). Adding to parent's challenges is the evolution of adolescence, which now lasts longer than ever before **and** it often starts earlier than ever before. Wow, does that sound like fun for parents!

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

Chapter 28

AN EXTRA 7-10 YEARS OF ADOLESCENCE… WHAT FUN!

*Such a long time… I can remember how proud I was when he was born… such promise… such potential. Seventeen years ago. (sigh). High school almost over. About time for our "Golden Years"… travel, time to play… **Money** to travel! **Money** to play! In a couple of months, Nate will be off to college. Yeah, some tuition to pay but he'll be working too. All grown up now…*

*(**1 year later**) What happened!? You need WHAT? Ok, ok, we'll be there in three hours. Just stay there. Ok, three hours… ok?*

*(**another year later**) What have you been doing for the last six months? What were you thinking? Ok… What happens now? On probation for one semester…? Two semesters*

*(**and another year**) How much do you need? How much!? **How much!?***

*(**hallelujah!**) Whew! Had my doubts. Made it. He looks good in a cap and gown. So grown up.*

*(**four months A.G.- After Graduation**) Uh huh… uh huh. Well, sometimes it takes time to find the right job. No, if you take the job at the café, you won't have time to job hunt. Uh huh… uh huh… your apartment? Uh… uh… uh huh… your room? Sure, until you get on your feet. However long it takes. Uh huh… sure it's ok, Nate.*

*(**one… two… three… four years later…oh my!**) Such a long time… I can remember how proud I was when he graduated… such promise… such potential. Eight years ago. (sigh). Ever going to be over? "Golden Years?" (**sigh**)…*

Parents look forward to the day they can "launch" their children into adulthood. Unfortunately, to their surprise, launching takes more than they thought… or, many of their "launched" adult children often land right back home! The time frame of childhood and of adolescence has changed significantly over the past century. Did you know that there was not any such thing as adolescence a bit more than a century ago? Lucky parents, you say? Major changes in our society have lead to some fundamental changes in the structure of the family, including changes in the basic mission of the family and of childhood.

THE FAMILY- THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC UNIT FOR SURVIVAL
The **basic socio-economic unit for survival** for Americans (especially middle-class and higher class) is the **nuclear family** for modern U.S. history (early or mid-twentieth century on). Abundant natural resources well exploited by the American economic system has allowed many American families to survive and even flourish as nuclear families. In fact,

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

that even individuals could survive economically without significant family ties. Thinking of your own welfare or only of the nuclear family became more possible (and frequent) with this affluence. Going against the wishes or traditions of the parents of the adults or the in-laws, or matriarchs or patriarchs became possible and permissible, since doing so would not place the nuclear family in as much significant jeopardy as it would have before the last century.   In most other societies (including American history up to the twentieth century), the basic socio-economic unit for survival has always been the **multi-generational extended family**. Individuals and nuclear families were hard pressed to and usually could not survive without the physical, economic, financial, and political support of their multi-generational extended families.

A few years ago, when I was working with Cambodian parents in San Francisco, I asked them, "Who did you turn to when you were still in Cambodia, when you needed money? food? job opportunities? medical help? educational opportunities? help with security issues? influence with institutions?" The answer to all these questions was the family- but not the nuclear family, but the multi-generational extended family. Rich Uncle Jimmy… Auntie May… Cousin Lee and Kim… Great-uncle Benny… When I asked them who they turned to in the United States, they answered, "the bank, the food program, vocational agencies, Medi-cal and County Hospitals, the public school system, the police, advocacy and community agencies. They responded more like Americans. Probably were getting into credit card debt too!

The availability of multi-generational extended families has been rendered impractical through immigration and migration that have often spread families hundreds if not thousands of miles apart. The Cambodian parents revealed, that prior to immigration, they and their ancestors had lived for generations within a twenty-five mile radius.   The extended family had always been available. However, with immigration they had to turn to new social structures. Head Start, day treatment programs, community medical clinics, country clubs, food banks, self-help groups, gangs, the public schools, and other places of gathering and social service programs can be seen as modern American society's attempts to replace the functioning of the lost multi-generational extended families. The loss of the availability of the extended family is often a new reality for many native-born Americans as well, as greater social and physical mobility has spread Americans often hundreds and thousands of miles away from their extended families within America.

CHILDREN DIDN'T USE TO DO "CHORES"
Children in earlier societies did not do "chores" (maybe your kids **won't** do chores, but that's a different issue!). Chores for modern American kids are often symbolic experiences with minor functional significance to train them in values and practices that will serve them when they become independent adults.   In prior times, children did not do "chores"… they did real **work**! Work that was critical to the survival and well being of the family. Mainstream American culture can encourage **individuation**, since the individual can survive and even flourish by him/herself in American society economically (however with potential negative emotional, psychological, and social consequences).   Children often

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

interpret individuation as independence, which leads to ever earlier preparations for adulthood. In other words, starting adolescence earlier than ever. A restlessness develops towards leaving the family as soon as possible, and individuation becomes an unfortunate ego-centrism and selfishness. In most other societies and in other eras, taking care of family or community first was how one took care of oneself, since only the family or community could provide security. The family (usually the extended family) was primarily an economic unit. Families had family businesses or family work. In feudal times, class distinctions restricted families even more to their hereditary work as serfs, merchants, soldiers, etc. When the family is primarily an economic unit, then each of its members is a worker in the family economy. As soon as a child is able to contribute to the family work at 3 or 4 years, he or she begins to work. As the child reaches full physical capacity (usually between 12 to 15 years), then he or she is expected to perform all the work of an adult. Work was essentially physical work. Advanced academic or intellectual development, finding and reaching one's potential are often counter-indicated to taking on ones physical role in the family work force. Taking care of oneself first with further intellectual development could result in the disintegration of the family <u>and</u> self-destruction, since individuals could not survive alone.

However, with the richness of American economics and the development of adolescence, it became possible for individual self-interest <u>not</u> to be automatically against the best interests of the family. The American nuclear family in a flourishing economy can obtain enough economic resources through the work of a single parent (or with the spouse in the two income family) so that the family is no longer primarily an economic unit, but rather a **child development unit**. The family as a child development unit, does not require its children to participate in income or subsistence production, but can focus on creating advanced economic and social opportunities for its children through a nurturing developmental process involving intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social stimulation, advanced education, accrued experiences, and gradual increases in responsibilities. Since the family is not dependent on every child's work for the family's survival, it can promote the individuation of one, some, or all (depending on the overall resources of the family) of its children- thus promotes the success of the family not only in the present but also for successive generations. You can see this expressed when a child who hasn't done his or her chores for the night, but also has a project due for school is often allowed to skip doing the chores and do the school work. Or, when a parent tells a child that his or her "job" is to be a kid, or to go to school. In other words, to develop more fully and freely.

In communities or in families, where there is significantly inferior resources, rights, or access for individuals, the family, and the community, then there is often a group culture to deny the individual to promote the entire group. Sacrifice of the low-resource group for the individual is frowned up (and dually deadly). In contrast, affluent and secure families and communities can promote its individual members to meet their own needs—to meet their potential. "Find yourself." "Do your own thing." However, in economically and politically disenfranchised communities, each member often is given the responsibility of the entire

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

community to carry in his or her affairs. Jackie Robinson, for example, carried the burden of representing all African-Americans as he became the first African-American to play major league baseball. He had to subjugate his personal needs and face intense overt racism in order to promote the needs of his community.

EXTENDING CHILDHOOD- THE EMERGENCE OF ADOLESCENCE

Mammals are considered among other animals, the highest and most intelligent form of life. Brain size and functioning and adaptability distinguish mammals. Two differences are very significant: the longer period of gestation, the relative helplessness of mammal infants, and a longer period of maturation to reach full adult functioning both physically and cognitively while under parental care and training. Many other species in other genus bear young that are functionally miniature adults who are able to fend for themselves immediately. Among mammals, humans have the longest period of childhood. From the helpless dependent infant, the human child, historically up until the last century or so, developed over 12 to 15 years to full adult capacities.

Technological changes in primarily (or initially) European and European-American society have redefined childhood's length. In less technologically advanced times (prior to the late 1800's in Europe and America) or societies (many Third World countries or specific communities/regions), adult functioning was largely defined by physical development- the physical capacity of females to bear children starting at 12 to 15 years of age, and of males to perform the demanding gross motor tasks of agricultural and low technology life at 13 to 16 years of age.

However, as technological advances (electricity, guns, gas, coal, and steam powered machinery for example) began to relieve or lessen the physical demands of work and survival, then cognitive function has become more and more critical to work and survival. Cognitive "strength" replaced physical strength as the key to survival and success in society. Delayed adulthood and a longer childhood where intellectual functioning can be developed more and more fully lead to the here-to-fore unknown developmental period of adolescence. During adolescence, while physical development is relatively completed, psychological, social, and intellectual development enters into advanced, highly challenging, and intense growth. At 12-14 years of age, most individuals are relatively physically mature and emotionally, psychologically, socially, and cognitively able to do basic physical work (fully qualified to be an hamburger flipper!). However, as society changed in the late 1800's and early 1900's, more technologically challenging work required more sophisticated workers.

The most successful individuals and communities in the current technological society are not those with the greatest physical prowess, but those with the most advanced and sophisticated psychosocial and intellectual functioning. European-Americans or middle and upper class Americans with historically greater access to technological advantages have gained greater access to higher education as well. Adolescence as a period for advanced development, first was created for 14-18 year old children (childhood was

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

extended about 4-5 years) to gain an high school education (now qualified to be the assistant manager of the hamburger flippers!). This happened in the late 1800's and the development era of adolescence was conceptualized for the first time in history. Graduating from high school was considered one's entry into adulthood for first half of the twentieth century. However as society became even more complicated, an even higher level of training and sophistication became required for high adult functioning. High school was no longer considered enough and now training or education became extended to ideally include four years of college (now qualified to the manager of the hamburger flippers!). And eventually higher training (graduate school… extended internships) into the mid-twenties. Full adult functioning is currently largely delayed until at least the mid-twenties. Childhood, already extended 4-5 years to include adolescence the previous century, has had to be extended again in the late twentieth century another 7-10 years in America. Adolescence more than doubled in length! Or, childhood doubled in length! No wonder the kids get antsy!

Economic hardships can preclude a family from allowing children to have an adolescence (especially an extended adolescence into the mid-twenties). The sacrifice of giving up education and advanced intellectual training becomes necessary for the current survival of the family; the children (adolescent or young adult) must work now. Present expenditures of time and energy for present needs eliminate investing in potential future gain. It often takes great sacrifice and hardship to turn the family into a child development unit. Education as a gift of the time to develop to the children is often unarticulated, especially during adolescence and late adolescence (a.k.a. as young adulthood, from 18 to 25 years old). Are you willing and able to give this gift to your children? Do they understand it as a gift? How can they understand it as a gift unless you can articulate it? Or, do they see it as a denial of their independence… their adult independence (remember, for most of history, they were adults at about 13 years old)? And, what if they are unable to understand or accept the gift of time? A gift can only be given if it is received. For some parents, that may mean letting their "independent" adolescents/young adults stumble into the adult world with limited preparation. Hopefully, those of you with younger children will prepare them … and yourselves for their "long" childhood… their extended adolescence.

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

Chapter 29

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF…FIRST!

*Watching Joey's favorite show now (sigh). Well, at least it's not too violent… or too little kiddie! Kaitlin's show before that was ok. Sure would have liked to watch that movie on HBO… I missed it at the theaters. Think Joey had me take him to **his** movie with his buddy the first time I tried to see it, and Kaitlin really, really, REALLY had to see that teen true love/lost soul movie the other time I was going to see it (sigh). We had rented the video on a Friday night, but I never got to watch it. Kaitlin watched her movie first, and then Joey put on his movie. Then the next day, Joey watched his second video first. Then we had dinner at grandma's. Then Kaitlin put on her other video on Sunday. I was going to watch my video after they went to bed, but then Joey tells me that he supposed to bring treats for a party at school AND Kaitlin would just DIE if her top weren't ironed so she can wear it the next day. So, back to the salt mines (**sigh**). By the time I finished baking the cupcakes and ironing her top it was too late to watch my video… and it was due back the next morning. Well, at least, these cookies I made (**double chocolate w/ double chocolate chips! SuperYUM!**) are going to taste good. **What?** There's only **one** cookie left? It's the LAST COOKIE!? Joey wants it? Kaitlin wants it? It's the **LAST COOKIE!!** **I'm eating it!** I shopped for the ingredients! I baked the cookies! **I baked three dozen cookies! They ate the first 35 cookies! It's the LAST COOKIE!! I'M EATING THE LAST COOKIE!!**

This might rub you the wrong way as a caring dedicated parent- self-sacrifice is for martyrs and for insecure people. The underlying message of self-sacrifice is that everyone else and their needs are more important than oneself and ones own needs. You are worse than useless to your child if you do not take care of yourself first. You become a negative model of placing oneself second to others. Your child will model you, and consider him/herself less worthwhile than others as well. I used a similar story to this as a metaphor in a training of preschool teachers, almost all of them women, saying "sometimes, when there's only one cookie left, I eat it!" Interestingly, during the break, I overheard one of the women in the hallway saying, "I could never do that to my children!" I was fascinated by what she meant by "that." What was the horrific thing that she would be doing to her children? I am sure that her children are very well loved, nurtured, and their needs attended to. I was not as confident that her needs were similarly attended to. In an earlier article, I expounded at more length on children whose needs are immediately and constantly raised to the highest priority over everyone else's needs. The consequence of this was the creation of tyrants who demanded to be serviced by hand and foot; and, who would go into self-righteous outrage when disappointed. They would experience the disappointment as betrayal and feel absolutely entitled to severely punish the "perpetrator," i.e., his/her parent. That is a real danger to "never" doing "that" to your child. Unfortunately, in our society, the requirement for parents (most especially, mothers) to care for children has been distorted to mean that parents (especially, mothers) must sacrifice their own needs… sometimes, in total. It is important to remember that the parenting role includes not only

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

loving, nurturing, and providing for needs, but also presenting models of how to function as healthy individuals, and in healthy relationships.

SECURE YOUR OWN MASK FIRST

What happens when you don't take care of yourself first? A mother to a developmentally delayed teenage boy told me how this became very clear to her on an airplane trip. As she and her son settled into their seats, the stewardess began the usual safety instructions: seat belts, emergency exits, and so forth. The mother had heard these instructions dozens of times. However, this time as the stewardess began explaining the oxygen masks, she heard for the first time, its deeper meaning. "If you are sitting next to a young child or someone who needs help, place and secure your own mask first; and then help the other person with his or her mask." She repeated to herself, "**secure your own mask first…**" Of course, her instinct was to take care of her son first.   But what if her son got scared and struggled with her… if the oxygen mask didn't go on right away? Then the mother would have been without oxygen and liable to be unable to function. It became obvious to her, that if you don't take care of your own oxygen mask and can't breathe, you couldn't help your child? **"Yourself… first."** She said it was so clear, how can you help someone else if you aren't ok yourself. Years of struggle to support her son and advocate for him had given her experience being worn out and depleted. When at times over the years, she had been too tired or too stressed, she had been less able to care for her son. "Yourself… first." If she didn't take care of her own needs, how could she have the ability and wherewithal to come to her son's assistance?

In my life, both personally and professionally, I try to take care of myself first. Once as I was speaking on this, a woman interjected, "Oh, you can do that because you're a man!" She had an excellent point. In our society, men are more acculturated to being independent and taking care of their own needs. In the extreme stereotype, some men take care of their own needs so selfishly ("taking care of #1"), that other people's, including their families' needs fall by the wayside. On the other hand, women are more acculturated to place their needs secondary to the needs of the family—specifically, the children's needs and often the husband's needs. Unfortunately, sometimes this means that the wife/mother has placed her children and her husband at the top of the list (along with relatives, friends, work), and with herself falling to the bottom of the list. Sometimes, functionally, she is not on the list at all! She may even suffer great emotional, spiritual, and physical harm as a result.   It is important for all parents to balance their own needs with that of the others in the family. Do you want your children to grow up to be either of the following examples?

PRINCES & PRINCESSES & PREY

Some parents take care of their children first without regard to their own needs. The unfortunate model or message children can get is that they are supposed to be treated like princes or princesses. Not only will such children act like tyrants within their homes, but also outside of the homes, they will demand and expect similar treatment. They will expect others to defer to them, to deny personal needs in other to serve them. And, will be either devastated that others won't automatically kowtow to them, or will be outraged and feel

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

completely self-righteous and entitled to punish the "perpetrators".   Upon punishing them, will then be surprised that they won't be forgiving and still open to further relationships. As much as you may love your children, in the real world people won't love them the same way. They won't be so caring, so forgiving or accepting. They will often be judgmental, and even vengeful. Is it any wonder that being accused of being "stuck up" or a "prima donna" remains a major indicator of social success or failure?

On the other hand, children may assume the model of deference and second class citizenship that you have modeled. They may also believe and behave as if they don't matter… that their needs are not important… that they exist only to serve someone else. They become easy prey for the predators in the world. In asserting my worth to my own children (eating the last cookie!), I am modeling to them that there is a balance between caring for others and caring for oneself. If I am truly and totally self-sacrificing, I am not important enough to have needs, to feel good, to have joy. I do not want to teach my children to be egocentrically selfish, but at the same time, I do not want to teach them to be martyrs. You know what happens to martyrs? They DIE!! But on the other hand, they get to suffer a lot first! There are many people (including those who grew up to become parents!) that live as martyrs, especially to their children. Historical figures that suffered and died as martyrs did so to serve great causes- causes that often could not otherwise be served except in that fashion. The "great cause" of raising a child is NOT well served through the martyrdom of parents. Your behavior teaches. What does your child learn? Your child learns that everyone else (or someone else) is so much more important than him/her… that everyone else's (or someone else's) minor desire or whim is always more important than your child's fundamental needs. Then he/she becomes highly vulnerable to innumerable predators that will be glad to exploit him/her. Your desire to watch something more intellectually stimulating on television after spending hours working and then doing household chores **is** more important than your child's desire to watch a third (or is it a fourth?) Pokeman videotape! Eat the last cookie! Buy the kind YOU like! Watch the movie YOU want! Shop the store YOU like! Eat at the restaurant YOU like… with CLOTH tablecloths and napkins… and no clowns!!

BEING THE PARENT YOU WANT TO BE
There is a method to this madness, however. It is not just about the balance between taking care of children and taking care of yourself. If you are at your best because you take care of yourself, then you are much more likely to be your best at being who you want to be- your Ideal Self. And, for a normal conscientious adult with children, his/her Ideal Self includes being the best father or mother, he/she can be. Invariably, when are you at your worse with your children? When you are depleted emotionally, physically, intellectually, and spiritually. **When you have not taken care of yourself!**   Immersed in the family stress of an aging grandma in a convalescent home… distracted by pressures from work… deadbeat tired from long days and evenings and short sleep… discouraged doing meaningless unfulfilling work, you become less tolerant, less understanding, more touchy. And, much more likely to be the ogre of a parent you hate to be to your child. And, the

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

more you are emotionally, physically, intellectually, and spiritually healthy, the more likely you will be the kind of parent wish to be.

FREED FROM THE PERSONAL TWILIGHT ZONE
The first three blocks or parts to the foundation: knowing yourself, being a model of self-love, and taking care of yourself first, really have to do with you and you getting YOURSELF AND YOUR SELF-ESTEEM TOGETHER FIRST.   In any system (a family), the most powerful members of the system (in a family, the parents) have the greatest influence on the well being of the system/family as a whole and of each individual member. An effective parent is similar to the child standing in the middle of the seesaw at the pivot point. He/she can adjust his/her weight one direction or the other to compensate for any imbalances on the ends. He/she can significantly neutralize or augment any instability or energy in the seesaw dynamics (bouncing wild kids!). His/her ability to be "centered"- that is, emotionally, physically, intellectually, and spiritually healthy defines his/her availability to meet the needs of the children and the family as the dynamics of the family fluctuate (from stress, economic demands, changes…). On the other hand, a parent may become quite unavailable and unable to meet these needs due to personal challenges and disruptions (including alcoholism, drugs, stress, physical disabilities, and so forth). Instead of counter-balancing the destabilizing effects on individuals and the family from outside and also, developmental challenges, the ineffective and/or unavailable parent further destabilizes the individuals and the family with his/her own behavior. Similar to a kid jumping around on top of the seesaw (jumping on and off, as well), such a parent destabilizes the child's foundation of self-esteem. Such a parent is fundamentally disabled and/or distorted in building his/her child's self-esteem because he/she HAS NOT TAKEN CARE OF HIM/HERSELF. Many people, who have had difficult lives and feel low self-esteem, seek to take care of that by not taking care of themselves, but by taking care of others. Many human services professionals do this. Many parents do this. Neither group can truly take care of others or their children to the degree and effectiveness they desire because of their own unresolved personal issues. What's the best thing you can do for your child? Take care of yourself, first!!

How do you do this? What do you need to do? Get out of your PERSONAL TWILIGHT ZONE where your buttons are getting pushed. The Twilight Zone was always a place where things were never what they appeared to be; where what was supposed to happen never did, or did in some distorted manner. Each person has a personal Twilight Zone born and nurtured during his/her childhood vulnerability. Protecting your child from YOUR anxious experiences, giving them what YOU didn't get, nurturing in your child the pain YOU felt… whether or not your child is actually anxious, even wants or lacks what you want to give, or feel any pain, especially your pain. I have worked with many loving parents who projected their anxieties, losses, traumas, stresses, and pains onto their children, and then inflicted "loving" smothering pressure onto them. Is your child that fragile that he/she cannot tolerate a minor disappointment? Often times, a parent projects into his/her child his/her own unresolved issues of vulnerability from his/her

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

childhood. Unconsciously, he/she may be feeling/thinking "Mom didn't show me that she cared about me. She didn't let me do anything… that hurt a lot. I'm still hurt and angry at her for this. I have to let my child do these things, because I don't want her/him to suffer as I did… I don't want her/him to be angry at me like I was at my mother. I could <u>never</u> do that to my children!" Yet, upon examination by any set of criteria, by any halfway objective person, this usually is anything but a fragile child. Sometimes the frailty is an internalized pain from old issues. A mother, who as a young woman became permanently estranged from her own mother, had lived twenty years with a deep painful loss. Currently, she lived in terror and anxiety that the parent/teen conflicts she had with her daughter had would result in them becoming estranged as well. When I helped her examine her Twilight Zone, she was able to articulate this fear and how it increased the tension of interacting with her daughter. When I asked her daughter, "When you argue with your mother, do you worry that your relationship as a daughter and mother will be destroyed?" With a look of absolute surprise, she replied, "Of course not. It's just about the stuff… ya know, chores and curfews and grades and stuff." Her mother also had a look of surprise… and immense relief! It was just about "stuff"- not about losing her! With that, she was able to relax and go ahead and do her mother thing (including taking care of herself) without fearing losing her daughter. They had been both freed from the mother's personal Twilight Zone. Often, your personal Twilight Zone will prevent you from taking care of yourself. Taking care of your personal Twilight Zone is taking care of yourself. And you will be then the most able to take care of your child.

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

Chapter 30

AVAILABLE & THEN SEPARATE

*Wow! What a busy week! So much going on at work. I think I got home late almost every night. Missed a lot of practices and lessons… and Julie's play too. She was really disappointed. **I** was really disappointed. I've been pretty good about being there for them. Not that it's hard… hanging with the kids is so great.   And, that overnight trip on Thursday. Missed a couple of bedtime stories too… and a goodnight kiss or two. I sure missed the kids. But I gotta do what I gotta do. And, yep…there's the yard, and the door that needs fixing… and the regular housecleaning. But I stayed up late and got up early and got that under control. Whew! It's Saturday morning and I'm here and **I'm available!!** It's playtime! Tickle them rascals awake… sleepy, then giggly hugs. This is the best. Kids are the best. Whatcha wanna do? Play tag? Go to the park? Play a game? Draw together? Rassle? Gotcha!! Can't catch me! Oh yeah? Watch this! Wow… here we go! Huh? What? Where you going? Whatcha doing? Going with who? Allison next door? When? Now? But... but… You're going? But… but, I… **but, I'm available!!***

AFTER KNOWING & LOVING & TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF
When you are able to truly know yourself (including your hang-ups, temperament, and ghosts) and can love and take care of yourself then you can follow through on the fourth part of the foundation of building Self-Esteem in your child.   You can be **EMOTIONALLY AND PHYSICALLY AVAILABLE.** You cannot be available if you are still overwhelmed in your confusion about who and what you are, your self-hatred, and your sense of being not taken care of.   Your energies are depleted in dealing with this in your emotional and psychological Twilight Zone. A very loving dad was trying so hard to do what was right for his young son. However, with the divorce from his wife (his son's mom) still fresh in his mind, he had the hardest time being available for his son. His pain from the divorce was intense, and as much as he knew that his son was suffering too, his own pain made it difficult for him to focus on his son's needs. And, because of the deep loss that he suffered from his own parents divorce (and his father subsequent abandonment of him and the family), whenever he experienced his son's distress, he would project onto him the unresolved rejection and loss issues that he still had not fully resolved. He was consumed with debilitating guilt whenever his son expressed missing his mother (or missing him when staying with her). He would then try so hard to distract him from the hurt (in reality, distract himself from his own loss and guilt). His son who was very in tune to his dad's pain would sometimes suppress his own distress, and try to be "good" for dad by comforting him. Only when the dad was able to understand his own deep loss, resolve his guilt for the divorce (he had tried for years to make the marriage work), and then take care of himself, was he able to be the foundation of stability and security for his son. He was then able to emotionally and physically available to him.

Ronald Mah, M.A., Ph.D.
Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, MFC32136
Psychotherapy, Parent Education, Consulting & Staff Development
433 Estudillo Ave., #305, San Leandro, CA 94577-4915
(510) 614-5641 Office - (510) 889-6553 fax - E-mail: Ronald@RonaldMah.com - Web: www.RonaldMah.com

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

You count, you matter. You found out (or didn't find out) that you really mattered with the quality of attention, care, and availability from your adult caregivers.   Your child needs to know that for you, he/she really counts and matters too.   He/she gets that basic psychological and emotional security from your being emotionally and physically available to him/her. If you are available, then he/she knows he/she counts. If you are not available for whatever reason, then he/she thinks he/she doesn't count.   Numerous studies have found that the most important variable for whether or not a boy or a girl has positive or negative outcomes in adult life, including alcohol and drug use, early sexual experiences, academic accomplishments, criminal behavior, and financial success is the presence of an emotionally available father figure or not. This is not to deny the importance of mother figures, but that mother figures are more commonly present given the cultural traditions of parenting. Mothers being emotionally available and present are more of a given in most societies, while fathers are much less a given.   In many societies, if the father is economically present (that is, a good provider), that is considered adequate. Emotional availability is not required culturally.   In some cases, emotional connectiveness to the children by the father may even be discouraged. In the history of human society and the evolution of gender roles (discussed in an earlier article, V.3.7, From 30%- Origins of Male Female Differences), boys and men were training to be emotionally detached in order to be the warriors and hunters of the community.   However, society especially in the United States has evolved significantly, that this emotional detachment has had major negative consequences to the Self-Esteem of children (and of men!).

WHY CHILDREN WAIT UNTIL YOU'RE ON THE PHONE TO NEED YOU
Almost all parents have had this same experience. You spend hours in the same room or the next room with your children. For hours they play happily with little or no need for your attention or help. Then the telephone rings. "Hi… Oh hi Lisa! How are you?" As you start to settle into your chair for a nice conversation with a dear friend, within seconds comes the cry, "Mommy! (or Daddy!) I can't find my toy!" or "I'm hungry!" or "I need help!" Aaargh! Why now? How come when I can give them all the attention they need, they DON'T want it? And, the second I'm on the phone and can't give them the attention, they suddenly want it… desperately?! The answer is in the difference between attention and availability. They don't necessarily want or need your attention. For the most part, they're fine on their own. That's why they virtually ignore you up until the phone rings. What they want is your availability! Up until the phone rang, you were available. With the security that you were available to them if they had any needs, they were able to continue to play and explore with a sense of safety and comfort- "Mommy or Daddy is here for me if I need them."   Therefore there was no need to grab your attention to confirm your availability. Once you were pulled away… once your availability was drawn away by the telephone, then the security they had was endangered. And, then they felt compelled to re-check your availability to them… not compelled to get your attention per se. Of course, as you try to continue your conversation with Lisa and try to quickly put off their demands, they feel even more anxious because YOU AREN'T AVAILABLE! They will become more aggressive and demanding of you until you either lose your temper or give up your adult moment.

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

What can you do? Remember when your baby-toddler was just beginning to crawl or walk away from you in social situations? First, he/she would cling to you until finally the sense of security and his/her curiosity grew. Then, he/she would wander off a few feet, only to return back to you… "Are you still here for me? Is it ok? Am I ok?" would be the message of his/her look into your eyes. You'd smile and say, "It's ok. I'm still here. I'm watching." And, he/she would go off again- perhaps a bit farther this time. And, return again to check in again, "Still here? Still watching?" Your smile and caress would confirm your continued availability. "Go ahead, I'm watching. I won't go away." Encouraged, he/she would wander off again. Over and over, this dynamic would repeat itself until secure in your availability, he/she would go off and not need or even think of you unless there was a crisis of some sort. And, if there was a crisis… a boo-boo, a loud noise, you'd fly across the room to comfort and reassure him/her, "Mommy (or Daddy) **is still** available for baby!!" Eventually, with the experiences of availability confirmed, the confidence of your child grows for him/her to become ever more securely independent.

Ok, but what about the phone call? Since you know that they don't necessarily want your attention, but instead are checking on your availability, you can do one of two things: one, you give them your availability non-verbally, or two you can offer and assert a contract of availability. Especially with younger children, all you may need to do, as you continue your conversation, is to look them in the eyes, give them a smile, make the quiet gesture with your finger to your mouth, and pull them to your lap or side in a hug. In doing so, you have given them your availability through affectionate touch. Many children will rest comfortably and contentedly on your lap or leaning against your hip for a ten to twenty minute conversation. On the other hand, if this is not practical or does not satisfy your children, then you can offer them the contract of availability… to be exercised shortly. Excusing yourself for a moment from the caller (you can do this, you know!) and covering the mouthpiece with your hand, you can say, "I need to talk on the phone for a bit. When I'm done, I can do that for you (or answer your questions)." The contract of availability puts a boundary or a time frame in the near future. There is often no compelling reason for the children's needs or demands to be met immediately. Waiting won't kill them! This honors their needs, but also asserts the adult's need to have adult moments (i.e. an adult conversation with another adult!). This also reconfirms the adult's availability without making the adult have to jump when the children asks him/her to jump. Following through after the phone call is essential of course. In addition, you should add, "And, if I forget after I finish the phone call, be sure to remind me to do that…. OK?" By saying this, the adult empowers the children to enforce the contract of availability (because many times, we do forget!). The "OK?" at the end of the statement, seeks the affirmation that the contract has been understood and accepted. Many children will accept this without difficulty; they have been heard, the availability has been confirmed, and they have been empowered. If on the other hand, children still insist on their demands be met immediately, then the adult can be clear and confident that they have been appropriate and reasonable about boundaries and respect, and feel perfectly OK about kicking the children out of the room! Or, punishing them for refusing to be reasonable and acting like entitled little tyrants! "Yes,

Ronald Mah, M.A., Ph.D.
Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, MFC32136
Psychotherapy, Parent Education, Consulting & Staff Development
433 Estudillo Ave., #305, San Leandro, CA 94577-4915
(510) 614-5641 Office - (510) 889-6553 fax - E-mail: Ronald@RonaldMah.com - Web: www.RonaldMah.com

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

I'm available. No, I'm NOT at your beck and call. Yes, I'm your parent. No, I'm not your servant! Yes, you count. No, you don't matter so much that I don't count!"

THERE'S A ME AND THERE'S A YOU!
When there is a "me" as well as a "you", then you, as a parent can be emotionally available and still be able to define and keep your and your child's boundaries distinct.   This is part of how you give him/her his/her chance to have power and control in their young lives. When your children are able to run off and play with their neighborhood buddies (that is, separate), it meant that they are secure enough in their own resiliency and secure that you can be… that you still are available if truly needed. They are confident enough that they can handle most issues on their own, and that you are available to aid in those that they cannot handle. Of course, it can be lonely when they separate, but it is a healthy loneliness! By separating, you allow your child to feel stress and to deal with it (successfully). This is empowerment rather than rescuing. It is through experience with anxiety (anticipatory anxiety) that the child learns how to cope with it in a healthy manner.   On the other side, while remaining available, you must also separate from your children. Are you proud of your children's accomplishments? Of course! But is your Self-Esteem primarily or completely dependent on their accomplishments? That is dangerous. Your Self-Esteem needs to be from your own ability to have the power & control, the ideal & real self, the respect & love, and sense of competence you desire as expressed in your accomplishments and who you are in your family and community. If your Self-Esteem rises and falls with your child's Little League batting average or his/her grade point average, then you have not successfully separated from them. Of course, a major part of your Self-Esteem will normally be based on being the kind of parent you seek to be, which will be expressed in the kind of person your child has become. However, the quality of your child is not the same as the quantity of awards and performance your child accrues.   Do not get enmeshed with each other. Respect and teach respect of each other boundaries. When you invade your child's boundaries by being overly invested in him/her emotionally, by being demanding, and by judging, you are being abusive. When you allow your child to invade your boundaries, you are teaching him/her it is OK to abuse others. **The essence of abuse is the invasion of boundaries** (sexual abuse is the crossing of the line that asserts the right to not have one's sexuality accessed without permission… which a child developmentally cannot give; physical abuse is the crossing of the line that asserts a persons right not to hurt; emotional abuse is the crossing of the line that asserts the right to love oneself). Children desperately need boundaries. It is terrifying to exist without clear ones; thus the need to continually test for them when they are not consistent. **The first and most influential boundaries that children experience are the boundaries between themselves and their parents.** A clear boundary between parents and children IS nurturing! To be available yet separate is healthy.

When you are able to know, love, and take care of yourself, and be emotionally and physically available, then you can get further out of your Twilight Zone and learn how to the last two keys to building the foundation of Self-Esteem, and are just about ready to foster your children's Self-Esteem.