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BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

Chapter 36

BECAUSE I WANT TO... BECAUSE I NEED TO!

How are your kids doing? Your oldest is a boy, right?

Yeah, Freddie is 18 and Lana is 15. They're both doing great. They're both getting great grades. Freddie is really into soccer. He made the varsity as a sophomore so this is his third year on varsity. And, he still finds time to "rock and roll" with his guitar in their little band.

And, Lana? Didn't she like sports and music too?

I get praise from her music teachers all the time about her violin and piano skills. She was in a competition/performance last week. She loved it. Her piano teacher always is worrying about her spraining her fingers playing basketball! But she loves the game and the camaraderie with the other girls on her team too much to think of giving it up.

Are they social?

Social? Are you kidding!?! They always have something to do with friends every weekend. And Freddie has a girlfriend since he was a junior, and Lana has a boyfriend since the beginning of the semester.

Uh, don't you worry about them... uh, you know about them...

*Getting distracted? Getting into the wrong crowd? **Drinking or doing drugs? Being SEXUAL!?** Yes to some degree like all parents, but actually, not too much.*

How can you be so sure?

*Because I know who they are. **Because they know who they are... who they want to be.***

Several times in conversations with teenagers in my therapy practice, I have talked about a kind of relationship between parents and teenagers where the parents are able to trust that their children will not engage in any of the sensational and dangerous behaviors available to many youth in modern society: losing motivation in school, hanging around with negative people, drinking alcohol, experimenting with drugs, and engaging in immature and/or exploitive romantic and/or sexual relationships. I point out that some parents are confident that their teenagers are able to withstand and resist the negative influences and pressures common in modern society (from peers, from the media, from hateful people). With skepticism dripping in their voices, the teenagers have challenged me, how do the parents REALLY know their kids are not doing some or all of those behaviors. These youth knew that they lied and deceived their parents (or foster parents) regularly about these kinds of behaviors (which was part of the reason why they were sent or brought to therapy). Sadly, they knew that their parents should not trust them... that they were not the people their parents wanted them to be. Many of these parents had tried very hard to train and discipline their children to live the life of values that the parents had deemed appropriate. In fact, they made sure... they made the children behave. And, it worked when the children were young... it worked through childhood until adolescence. Then, it all fell apart.



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GETTING AWAY WITH INAPPROPRIATE DISCIPLINE

Parents can always MAKE young children behave in the manner that they wish. They can intimidate, punish, and force young children to toe the line that they draw. In other words, they can get away with techniques and approaches that they could never get away with in dealing with other adults. They can get away with being disrespectful, arbitrary, abusive (even violent, physically and emotionally), punitive, and erratic with their own children in their own households. They can even get away with being alcoholic, drug addicted, and mentally ill. “Getting away” with this behavior means that outside the view of the community and authorities, they go unchallenged and unrestricted. In addition, as un-empowered relatively powerless youth, their children cannot do much more than endure the parents’ actions. That is, they cannot do much about it until they become teenagers. Then the teenagers no longer has to take all the misguided and inappropriate, if not abusive behavior. The parents can no longer get away with it because of changes in the teenagers-dynamics and peer relationships.

For a long time, from early in childhood both parents and children operate from an illusion of control- that the parents can be and are in control. Parents make the children eat, dress, watch, go, and do what parents want because they are more powerful and intimidating. Children acquiesce to this domination as babies for the most part. However, it is an illusion that is perpetuated from both sides: the parents think they are in control, and the children believe they are controlled. However, as some of you have experienced, some children clearly refuse to be controlled. Spitting out that strained spinach is an initial defiance. And, how can you make a baby eat strained spinach!? Peeing and pooping at the wrong time and in the wrong places is another defiance. How can you pull out the pee and poop from the body if the child refuses to cooperate? “You better do it, or else!” As a child, “or else” means being dragged into a room, having clothes put on you, or forced to do things (often physically or through the physical manipulation of circumstances by parents). Some children resist this throughout their childhood. Many give in to it because they feel they do not have any choice, or because the consequences are unbearable. As they become teenagers, however, two things happen: the functionality of “or else” changes, and the need for acceptance evolves. At this point, the arbitrary or erratic parent no longer can get away with their discipline.

OR ELSE WHAT?

First, “do it, or else!” has an effect because of the physical dependence, smaller size, and practical immobility of the children. Children threatened with physical domination (including corporal punishment) cannot effectively fight the larger adult. They are also dependent on the household of the parents, and unable to move about or survive in the general community without adult support. In fact, it is illegal for a child to wander the streets alone or only with other children. “Do it or else, you’re grounded!” “Do it or else, you won’t get any dessert!” “Do it or else, you’ll get a spanking!” “Do it or else, you lose your allowance!” However, as children become teenagers (some earlier), they often come to realize that “or else” is more and more an empty threat. Just as parents could not



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make them eat strained spinach, or pull pee or poop out of their bodies, they cannot make them ingest values or learning, or pull maturity and responsibility out of them.

“You better not ditch school, or else I’ll bring you to school every day!”

“Yeah, right. Like there isn’t a back gate to the school! Whatcha’ gonna

do? Quit work to watch over me all day in school!”

“I warned you the next time you did this... Your curfew is now 8pm weeknights and 10 pm Friday and Saturday night.”

“Uh huh... you gotta find me first! Whatcha’ gonna do? Send out a search

party for me? Wrestle me to the floor and tie me up, if I’m goin’ out at

7:55pm on a Tuesday!”

“You better listen to me! I’m your parent. You better... or else... or else...”

“Or else, what? I’m not a baby anymore. I don’t have to listen to you. I’m

outta here!”

“Stop! You better not leave... or... or... or else...”

“Later...”

Frustrated with the realization that there is little or nothing they can do short of literally physically battling their children, the completion of the “or else...” threat becomes or else “I will not love you anymore,” or else “I will disapprove of you,” or else “I will reject you!” These are powerful sanctions that few children can tolerate resisting when their parents’ actions, resources, care, love, presence, and availability dominate their young lives. And, consequently children suppress or ignore their own desires and acquiesce to their parents’ demands. However, at the same time children discover that the physical “or else” is an empty threat, the emotional “or else” also loses much of its impact due to the normal developmental progression from childhood into adolescence. The center of children’s emotional, psychological, and social focus moves from their parents and family gradually more and more toward their peer group... “lions and tiger and bears... and teenagers... Oh my!” The loss of parental love, disapproval, or reject sanctions lose its force as teenagers turn more toward their peer group for guidance, support, and expectations. The approval of fellow teens, the expectations of the popular culture, and of those deemed “cool” becomes what many teenagers aspire to. In some adolescent groups, it is not cool to do well in school or to “sell out” to the corporate or mainstream world, and it is acceptable (to the point of gaining high social status) to be negative and destructive, externally in society and internally with ones own body. A teenage boy (a client of mine) told me how his defiance and menacing anti-social behavior, as well as multiple body piercings gained him recognition and notoriety among his peers. That it infuriated his parents and caused school officials sufficient fear and distrust they often treated him unfairly, compromising his academic progress was a consequence he accepted since his status among his peers was more vital to him. With this developmental



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change (you were raising your child to be an independent thinker and make his/her own decisions after all!... But not decide that way!!), parents can no longer get away with dysfunctional and inappropriate discipline and practices, including intimidation and disrespect.

THE “INFECTION MODEL” OF PEER INFLUENCE

Another way parents seek to handle this virtually inevitable developmental change is to promote their children’s association only with the “good” kids. The hope is that by associating with “good” kids, their positive attitudes and behaviors will influence your child to become the same. This is basically the positive version of the “infection model” of peer influences! The “goodness” of the perceived positive children would pass like a values virus through the group atmosphere and the other children will “catch” the behavioral bacteria which will then create integrity infections that will spread throughout their hearts, minds, and souls! This model tends to be more relevant the more malleable an individual is... the less secure, established, and stable the personality of the individual is. The younger or less experienced individuals tend to be the most vulnerable to this influence for the good or bad. Children and adults whose core identity has been largely formed are less influenced by the values and behaviors of their peers in the school, playground, workplace, and community. Such individuals would experience and examine the activities of their peers as they coincide and conflict with their inner established core values and identity, and chose whether to assimilate them or accommodate to them. They will not take these new values on without question or readily. Those individuals with insecure, immature, or naïve core identities would be much more likely to accept them without question. The negative infection model works in the same manner- the “badness” of the negative peer group also passes into other children who associate with them. Avoiding or preventing your child from associating from the “bad” kids- the bad influences becomes the logic approach to insuring your child’s positive development. While this perspective has some validity (for less secure identities), children do not join groups of peers or chose who to associate with randomly. Random association combined with the infection model of peer influences implies that if children randomly associate with other children, then groups... and group values and culture form randomly as well. Then your child just “happens” to have grouped with “good” kids, or “bad” kids, or whatever! Forcing or preventing associations becomes the logical preventative strategy. Which, by the way almost never works! Especially, the older the children become.

People, whether adult, child, or adolescent tend to form cliques or social groupings based on common interests, activities, and/or values. Even when other factors (age, moving into a new neighborhood, a job assignment or transfer, immigration) thrust people together, individuals will involve themselves or withdraw themselves according to common interests, activities, and/or values still. Encouraging your child to associate with the “good” kids works, if your child is also a “good” kid. If he/she is not a “good” kid, he/she will not feel comfortable with “good” kids.



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HOW DO YOU KNOW I'M NOT THE BAD INFLUENCE?

Once a mother was complaining to me that her teenage son (sitting next to her in the therapy session) was hanging around with a particular group of kids. That they were a bad influence on him. That one kid in particular was a bad influence on him. Unable to resist myself (or the possibility!), I asked her, "How do you know that your son isn't the bad influence!?" With this, the son who up until now had acted comatose, lit up and laughingly said, "Yeah! How do you know I'm not the bad influence on him!?"

Reframing so as not to disrespect her anxiety, I elicited from her son that he associated with that particular guy and the others because they were like him. He didn't like hanging out with the "good" kids because he didn't and couldn't identify with them, and they didn't identify or understand him. In fact, even when he had tried to hang out with the "good" kids (some of them were old friends from middle school) previously at his mother's insistence, he had felt uncomfortable- like an "alien imposter" in his words. Their "goodness" did not transfer over to him. He was IMMUNE from "goodness" infection! He did not become "bad" because he hung out with "bad" friends, they hung out together because their all being "bad" was what drew them together. You see even, "bad" (that is, sad, lonely, anxious, hurt, dysfunctional, odd) individuals want and need a community to belong to. And, that is NOT bad! It is very human. The so called "bad" kids form their groups because with all the rejection they experience in common from parents, teachers, and other adults, their fellow "bad" boys or girls are the only ones who accept them.

If parents get away with inappropriate and even damaging discipline for years but then "or else" loses its impact, and the "infection model" of peer influences is largely invalid, then what predicts and promotes the children becoming teenagers to gravitate toward other positive people and withstand the multitude of negative influences in society? Strict management and harsh discipline will not work. They can even backfire and create resentment and rebellion. However, adding the next guideline to clear boundaries and clear consequences presented with consistency, and augmented with praise builds the Self-Esteem that fosters a positive result.

6) CREATE INTERNALIZED MOTIVATION- Outside (parental or teacher) motivation through praise is fine, but it is only transitory. It is effective only if it occurs temporally close to the desired behavior or action. In addition, if a child becomes dependent on an adult for motivation, why should he/she do anything if there is no one around to motivate him/her? If there is no one present to praise or motivate, then the individual will be lost. Internalized motivation, praise, and morals need to be goal of adult teaching and interactions with children. Internalized motivation is what enables an individual to progress in his/her life; to be resistant to peer influence, media messages, and so forth. Without the development of internalized motivation in your child, parents cannot be confident that their children will make the healthy decisions and live the moral constructive life they dream for them. You are **guiding children to continuing building their own structures of self-esteem!**



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I was telling a colleague how great my two girls were... what great people they were... how well they managed their lives... the positives they achieved academically, athletically, and socially. She responded, "Oh, you're so lucky to have such great kids!" I answered in a half-joking and half-proud claim, "It's not luck. It's called parenting!" She laughed. Then she added, "It's so reassuring that they obey you... that they do what you want." Quite seriously, I said, "No, it's not that they do what I want... obey me or my wife. You see, they each obey themselves. They each are clear about the kind of people they want to be... the values that they believe in and that they want to live up to. I don't control their behavior. They don't answer to me or my wife. At one time, they did when they were younger. Now as emerging young ladies, they hold themselves responsible to being the 'good people' they have self-defined. And, the reassurance and confidence I have comes from knowing that their core self-definitions of being good people are strong and healthy. The pride of parenting comes from having positively influenced the development of those self-definitions." Of course, there remains multiple parenting responsibilities. However, it is their self-motivation that now drives them. And, they are competent drivers with good strong engines!



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THE PERFECT PARENT TRAP

A Perfect Household... (tired -- I need a break, but no time)

Perfect yard... (really tired, but not now)

The Best Toys... (should rest, but...)

The Most Stimulating Books... (so much work to do find them)

The Best Healthy, Tasty, Nutritious Food ... (but take out is very tempting)

Piano Lessons, Swim Lessons, Dance, Sports... (so little time -- so busy)

But an Unmade Bed... (I should just lie down in it!)

A Dead Plant... (too late now... take care of it later?)

A Toy on the Recall List... (how did I miss it!?)

Traditional (Sexist) Roles in the Books... (still more!)

Cookies and Ice Cream... (for them, but I need it can more!)

Too Much Driving... (rest time for me, please)

What about ME?! (Doesn't anyone get it?... Me... Me!)

In my counseling practice because I have a reputation of working successfully with difficult children, I often get referrals of children who have serious acting out problems -- sometimes to the point of having been kicked out of schools. Understanding that this is not a normal range of kids -- these are the exceptionally difficult kids supposedly, I start with a very clear assertive approach immediately. As soon as they come into my room, I tell them to sit down so I can talk to them and set up some rules. I should tell you that I have a very fun room for young children. One corner of the room has a couple of chairs, a couch, and my own chair for adults and older children to sit and talk with me. The rest of the room is full of toys and equipment for children to play with. And, a bubble gum machine full of M&M candy! You can usually see the excitement in their eyes, as they can't wait to get their hands on the toys. I sit them down and begin to tell them my expectations. I tell them that they can play with the toys as much as they want to as long as they play with one toy at a time. That they need to put away toys before they go on to other toys. And that sometimes, I will tell them what I want or don't want to them to do with a toy -- and that they need to listen and cooperate. They often look at me with obvious impatience. "Yeah, yeah alright already let me play," they are usually thinking.

I WONDER IF RONALD IS FOR REAL?

Then I tell them, that if they cooperate, that they will have a lot of fun with the toys and me in the room. Normally, the parents are in the room with us during the entire time. And, I tell them that if they don't cooperate, I won't let them play with the toys. And if they still misbehave, I will put them on time out somewhere in the room. And, if they still don't cooperate -- that is, refuse to sit down on time out, then I will either have to restrain them or kick them out of the room. They usually look at me with surprise and curiosity (and perhaps, a bit of challenge in their eyes!). And I ask them, "Do you do what some kids



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think when I say this?" "They think, 'I wonder if Ronald is for real?' And do you know what they find out?" They respond, "What?" I tell them, "They find out that I am for real!" Eyes get wide and mouths sometimes drop open. "So, what do you want to do?" I ask them again. All of them say they want to cooperate and play. Even though all of these children have been referred to me because they are very difficult to handle and supposedly act out a lot, easily half of them never misbehave at all in my office. For these children, all they ever needed was clarity of boundaries and clarity of consequences. Once they got that clarity from me, they were certainly smart enough to choose to respect the boundaries and get a positive consequence... having fun playing in the office. Another quarter of the children with test me once or twice to find out if I were "for real" or not. Once they found out that I was serious and would follow through, they stopped testing. And, also quite wisely chose to respect the boundaries and have the fun consequence of being able to play. For these children all they needed was a clarity of boundaries and a clarity of consequences, AND follow through. I would then spend my energy working with the parents on them setting clear boundaries and clear consequences, and why they previously had trouble doing that. With the remaining quarter of the children who acted out and continued to act out despite this clarity and follow through, I would work on the additional issues besides just clear boundaries and clear consequences.

There was a family that I worked with over a couple of years. They had a very difficult child who was very tenacious about pushing the boundaries. Over and over as we discussed how they disciplined their child (working through various developmental issues, temperament issues, learning disabilities, and family dynamics), we would come back to the need for them to have clearer and stricter boundaries for their child. This was evident from the beginning of therapy. When we discussed setting clear boundaries, they said they would follow through. They continued to have problems. There were some developmental issues that came up. We discussed how this affected their child and what they can do to help him. Among the things that they needed to do was to set clear and stricter boundaries. They continued to have problems. As they worked in collaboration with the school authorities it became evident that the child had some learning disabilities -- some learning style issues that created a challenge for him in relationships as well as academics. We discussed how to help him deal with these challenges. Included in how to help him, were the need to set clear and stricter boundaries with clear consequences. The parents still had trouble following through. As we began to examine why it was hard for the parents to follow through, it became clear that there were family of origin issues that the parents were projecting upon the child. Most of these issues have to do with boundaries (big surprise!) And their experience of boundaries being erratic, harsh, and punitive. This made it very hard for them to have clear and strict boundaries and consequences for their child, because it made them feel like they were being the harsh and punitive parents they had as children. So, they continually tried to avoid having to be "mean" -- that is, follow through with consequences with their child. As much as they tried to avoid being mean, they keep coming back to the need to be strict. Their child needed it... even demanded it, despite it being so hard for them. The next guideline to build Self-Esteem is to



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7) DO THE RIGHT THING EVEN WHEN IT'S THE HARD THING

Many times people will come to something and becomes clear that this is what they need to do. However, since it is not what they are comfortable with doing, they avoid following through. They look for another answer -- another way to handle the problem. Eventually, however they come back to the same solution -- the same answer. And still, they don't want to do it. They still find it uncomfortable or even scary. So they look away again. They look for another way to go -- another way to handle the situation, another way to respond. They try new things and creative things. They may ask for help and look to others for additional resources. They try things or techniques that may be strange or exotic. No success. And they come back to the same solution, answer, or action they had come to before. But it is so difficult for them to follow through for some reason. So they try to find another way to resolve it again. Still they come back to the hard thing. Over and over a try to avoid doing the hard thing. And over and over they come back to needing to do the hard thing. Why is it the hard thing? Because it is the "right" thing -- the correct thing to do.

ON APPRECIATION

Sometimes the right thing is a need for the adult to take care of himself or herself. In the vignette above, the adult in trying to be the best -- the perfect parent, is wearing himself/herself out. The parent keeps on coming back to needing to give himself/herself a break -- a rest. Finally, the parent cries out, "What about me!?" Do it! Take care of yourself! To be able to care for yourself, you need to appreciate yourself. What about others appreciating you? No one is giving you credit? No one is giving you praise? No one appreciates what you are doing? What you are sacrificing to be that best parent possible? It is important to realize that no one can appreciate you to the degree you deserve! As much as someone (that usually being your child or your partner in the family, or your boss or colleagues at work) may enjoy, honor, or find what you offer as useful or even inspirational... even life changing, no one can appreciate you to the degree you deserve. For as much as someone may value what you offer, no one knows what it took for you to become the person you are... the parent you are... to be able to offer what you have. No one knows... no one else was there to know what journey you traveled, what obstacles and barriers you surmounted... what monsters or demons you fought and may still fight, what pain and trauma you suffered to become who and what you are to be able to offer what you can as an individual, a partner... as a parent. No one else was there when you went through all your struggles except for you. Only you were there... only you know... and therefore, only you can give yourself the appreciation you deserve. If you do not give yourself that appreciation, no one else ever will. (See the Handouts link on this website for a downloadable mini-poster "On Appreciation" in a Microsoft Word file).

YOU DO NOT NEED TO BE THE PERFECT PARENT

Do others appreciate how much you try to be a good parent? Do you appreciate how much you try to be a good parent? The key is to recognize that to try is not to demand perfection. Then you can appreciate your effort and your integrity at working at being a good parent. To be able to appreciate yourself, however, you need to be aware of (wary



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of) the desire to be perfect. It can be a devious trap. What is a perfect parent? What is a perfect child? Each child has his/her individuality, which makes “perfection” dependent on his/her getting his/her specific needs addressed. The perfect parenting for one child can easily be problematic and even dangerous for another child. While the basic principles of good parenting can be reasonably agreed upon, every child has his/her own nuances of energy and processes that require some adaptations. There is no singular universal perfect parent model unless you believe there is a matching singular universal perfect child model. A part of parenting will always be an on-the-spot in-the-moment artistic decision. An art teacher can teach you how to mix paints and colors; teach you how to choose and use different brushes; and show you the principles of composition, but as you mix the paint, it will always be an artistic decision that it is the right color and texture... as you place the brush on the canvas, it will always be an artistic decision how thick, wide, and long a stroke you will make. And, then an artistic decision again with the next stroke... then again. Parenting is a craft and a science, but it is also an art. Information that is shared by others or myself suggest craft and technique, and offer science and theory, but after that it is in your hands.

With that you must allow yourself the experiments and the inevitable mistakes. Remember, that even if you don't allow yourself the mistakes, they are going to happen anyway! And, if you are consumed with guilt or shame about the mistakes, you will not be able to activate your energy and focus to handle the mistakes. If you don't organize to handle the mistakes, then you will be likely to compound them. Remember, it normally is not a mistake that destroys a child, but a pattern of mistakes over time that are not recognized and addressed. When you end up blaming and shaming yourself, your focus moves away from the personality, development, needs, and issues of your child to your own morass of old self-doubts and recriminations. In demanding that you be a perfect parent, you send a powerful message to your child that perfection is possible. As you expect yourself to be a perfect parent, the message to your child is that he/she must become a perfect child. As you are disappointed in and angry with yourself, the model to your child is that of fundamental unhappiness and low self-esteem. Your child will always be most likely to emulate you positively and negatively. What model will you present? The self-hating anxious insecure parent? Your model of self-love, of loving, of honesty, and of humanity is the best message for self-esteem and health for your child. He/she is then the most likely to have compassion for his/her own humanity, rather than leak self-esteem from trying to be perfect.



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Chapter 38

THE 90 SECOND-A-DAY SELF-ESTEEM PRESCRIPTION PLAN

- 1) *I'm tired. Can't I sleep a little bit longer?*
"Time to get up."
- 2)(yawn).....
"Don't forget to brush your hair."
3) Where's my brush?
"Over there on the dresser."
- 4) *Where's my shirt?*
"Over there by the dryer."
- 5) *I can't find the matching sock!*
"There it is."
- 6) *Please tie my shoes.*
(Tie one shoe... tie the other...)
- 7) *Can I have pancakes today?*
"No time to make pancakes. Eat some cereal."
- 8) *What are you reading?*
"The newspaper article about the new school."
- 9)
"Time to go. Get your backpack"
- 10) *Is it going to rain tomorrow?*
"Showers in the afternoon maybe."
- 11) *I'm hungry! What can I eat?*
"There's crackers... and cheese in the refrigerator... and there's fruit"
- 12) *Can I go to Joe and Kathy's house tomorrow after school?*
"If you get your homework done first."
- 13) *...(practicing piano) ...*
"Don't forget soccer practice at 5 o'clock."
- 14) *Can I have some more spaghetti?*
"Eat your vegetables."
- 15) *Can I watch the baseball game?*
"OK, but bedtime in 30 minutes."
- 16) *Whatcha doin'?*
"Getting stuff ready for the picnic."
- 17) *Who was that?*
"It was Anna."



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BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

18) *Good night.*

“Good night.”

A TRUFFLE A WEEK

For about three years when I was supervising other therapists at a community counseling agency, we would often conduct the supervision sessions at the coffee shop across the street. The agency had a long relationship with the shop, even using it for staff meetings previously when there was not a large enough space in the agency buildings. The counseling rooms were usually fully occupied for counseling sessions with clients and the coffee shop had quiet areas where supervision and consulting about clients could take place in private. Each week, when my supervisee and I entered the shop, we'd always first order coffee or tea and sometimes a pastry or sandwich. By the cash register was a glass display case with Henry Schmidt chocolate truffles. For those of you who are not from the San Francisco Bay Area or are not chocolate truffle connoisseurs, these are highly decadent killer truffles! Although, I enjoy chocolate, I'm really a salty-crunchy snack fiend (potato chips... yum!). On the other hand, my wife loves chocolate, especially bittersweet chocolate (did you know that an ingredient in chocolate is very similar to THC- the active ingredient in marijuana? Or, that chocolate activates a hormone in the brain that is similarly activated when one is in love? Hmm... no wonder!). So whenever I went to the coffee shop with a supervisee, in addition to the coffee or tea, I would purchase a truffle to give to my wife later (about \$1.75- not a huge expense). I would stick it in my briefcase and sometime that night (or the next day, if I forgot), I would give it to my wife. Big deal? No, not really. **BIG deal? You bet!** What did this small token (a massive dose of cocoa and sugar laced with liqueur, not to mention massive calories!) mean? First, it meant that my wife is important enough to me that I think of my wife when I'm not with her. Second, it meant that I care enough to know her (major chocoholic!) and what she likes (craves! relishes! drools over... just kidding... kinda!). Third, that I enjoy that I can delight her with this simple gift... this simple message. What it all means or conveys is a confirmation of her special place in my life... her value to me. What happens to relationships when such messages are conveyed with regularity? What happens to relationships when such messages are a rarity?

ADD A MERE 5 SECONDS...

Some parents feel overwhelmed when contemplating how difficult and complicated it is to build the Self-Esteem of their children. With the intensity and demands of their day-to-day lives, they may complain that they don't have enough time to give their children what they need. Well, that is not an acceptable excuse with the “90 Second-A-Day Self-Esteem Prescription Plan.” In 90 seconds a day, you can build the Self-Esteem of your child! In any given day, there are numerous opportunities to build the Self-Esteem of your child. Take any of the many simple interactions that occur during the day between yourself and your child. “Do this... where's that? How come? Guess what? I saw... George went...” Suppose there are about eighteen such interactions each day. If you were to add a mere 5 seconds to each interaction (you don't even have to devote a whole 90 seconds at a time from your day!)... five seconds times eighteen interactions equals



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ninety seconds ($5 \times 18 = 90$) a day. What do you add to those five seconds? You add a simple “message of worth” to each interaction...

- ***“I’m sorry honey, it’s time to get up. I know it’s hard, but it’s time to get up.”***
- ***“There’s your favorite Spiderman shirt over there by the dryer. It’s nice and clean.”***
- ***“Don’t ruin your dinner. There’s fruit... those purple grapes that you really like.”***
- ***“Soccer practice at 5 o’clock. Give yourself enough time so you don’t have to be rushed.”***
- ***“Is it a good game? OK, but bedtime in 30 minutes. You need your rest.”***
- ***“Good night. Sweet dreams, honey. I love you.”***

What are the “messages of worth?”

- Acknowledgement and appreciation that it is difficult to wake up...
- Knowing and caring that your child has a favorite Spiderman shirt, and being delighted that he/she would be delighted to have it to wear...
- Nourishing with food while nurturing with a favorite (and healthy) treat...
- Caring about the potential upset to forewarn to help him/her avoid the stress of rush...
- Caring that he/she is passionate about his/her baseball game... and that he/she be well-rested...
- Caring to send him/her into his/her nightly rest with a last message of love...

Why are such messages of worth so important? Because your child’s Self-Esteem grows and solidifies when he/she knows that he/she and what he/she feels and experiences MATTER to you, because he/she MATTERS! Can you do this? Can you remember that any and every interaction you share with your child is communication about his/her worth? And, that not only your words, but also your tone, your body language and facial expressions, and your actions and lack of actions are messages of worth... or unworthiness? Whatever each interaction is about, it is also about the worthiness of the partner in the interaction. Parents often respond to the comment, question, or request



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without regard to the Self-Esteem of the commenter, questioner, or requester. They address the function of the communication without addressing the worth of the communicator. Consistently and conscientiously adding the 5 second message of worth to each of the hypothetical 18 interactions a day with your child will build his/her Self-Esteem in 90 seconds a day! Imagine if at work, at school, or in society or in the community in general, every communication YOU received from colleagues, classmates, or citizens contained a 5 second message of worth in addition to its functional message. You would be floating! Work, school, society, and the world would be such a better place!

Is this a “trick” solution? One of those “magic” fixes that are promoted all the time in the media? Of course, it’s a “trick” but not because it wouldn’t work. It’s a “trick” because to be able to follow through on it requires supreme focus and health. What would allow someone to follow through on the 90 Second-A-Day Prescription Plan? What would interfere with someone following through? If you are emotionally stable and have done the personal work to address your underlying psychological, childhood, and family of origin issues (that is, built the foundation to building Self-Esteem) then you can follow through with the guidelines to building Self-Esteem in your child. However, if your life is overwhelming... if the stress is debilitating... if your focus is drawn to the crises of your life, then it becomes difficult if not impossible to maintain the focus and consistency to add the “messages of worth” to each interaction.

GOOD AT “JUST” BEING TIRED

A few years ago, a colleague and I were talking about my fairly intense schedule at the time: about 20 hours a week of counseling appointments, 16 hours a week consulting and supervising therapists at the counseling center, miscellaneous consulting arrangements with other human services organization, and various speaking and training engagements throughout California. “Wow,” he said, “don’t you get burnt out?” After a moment’s reflection, I replied, “I’m pretty good at ‘just’ being tired!” I explained that if in life, you are intellectually stimulated, emotionally content, psychologically healthy, spiritually whole, and experience what you do as positively purposeful and that you have a sense of your role in the world (including your family) as being meaningful, then when an intense schedule gets rough, you “just” get tired. And, a little nap... a bit more sleep... and little R&R, and you’re ok again. However, if you are intellectually dulled, emotionally distressed, psychologically unstable, spiritually confused, and lack purpose and a place in the world, and become physically exhausted as well, then... then you would be devastated, burnt, fried, overwhelmed... and even desperate. Phew! And, if you are all of the above in a positive manner, then not only would you just be tired, then you’d more likely be able to be emotionally present to give your children (and others you interact with) the messages of worth they deserve and need.

Do you “just” get tired? Or, do you get overwhelmed and burnt out? Work on yourself and your own health and you too can “just” get tired! And still be focused on your own health and the health and Self-Esteem of your child. And, provide for your child the continual messages of worth that will build his/her Self-Esteem. Just 18 times a day? Only



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5 seconds at a time? A total of just 90 seconds a day? (Starting to sound like one of those abdominal reduction exercise gadget commercials, huh?) Don't wanna hear no mo' excuses that ya'll don' have 'nuf time! The message that I've put out over and over in this series of articles on Building Self-Esteem in the Adult-Child System is that you, the adult must strive for your own health and stability in order to build the Self-Esteem of your child. Love yourself and nurture yourself so you can love your child and nurture your child without suffocating him/her. Strive to become strong so you can have the strength to be a good parent, and so you can present a model of strength for your child to emulate. Live a life of integrity, so your child will see and do as he/she has seen you do... rather than to confuse him/her with what you profess but do not live. Doing for your child what you had not had done for you by your parents... and/or what you had not done (or compensated for) for yourself, does not work. The healthier you are, the more natural it will be to be the parent your child needs (or, the spouse or partner your partner needs)... the easier and more clear are the choices you need to make when faced with difficult parenting decisions (or, couples or family decisions). It takes more than a truffle a week to maintain a healthy couples relationship, but having the awareness and consistency that would allow one to give a truffle a week and communicate other regular messages of worth does portend a healthy relationship. Occasional praise and little gifts do not build, much less guarantee healthy Self-Esteem in your child. However, you as a parent having the wherewithal to consistently give eighteen five-second messages of worth a day establish the foundation and the increased potential of a child with high stable Self-Esteem.

A last thought... There will be many times that the time, energy, and stress of being a parent will make you tired. However, if you are doing it correctly, you will be "just" tired because doing it correctly will also energize you. How so? By having so much fun! If you're not having fun being a parent... if you're not finding your children to be delightful and giving of joy and energy to you, then you're doing something wrong.