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BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

Chapter 1

Baby to PreSchooler- The Development of Self-Awareness and Self-Esteem A Trick Question-- "Do babies have high self-esteem?"

It's a warm sleepy world. A vague feeling develops in my tummy...it grows and becomes more urgent. Gradually it becomes more and more uncomfortable. It doesn't go away. It's getting worse. WAHHHHHHHHH!!! Suddenly, out of that world up above, down swoops that sweet smelling, sounding, feeling familiar being. It says, "Oh, are you hungry?" in a gentle voice. A nipple or a bottle appears with warm sweet nourishment. I stop crying...grasping, sucking hungrily. "How's that sweetheart? You were really hungry weren't you? That's much better now, isn't it?" How I feel really matters to that sweet smelling, sounding, feeling familiar being.... I really matter to that sweet smelling, sounding, feeling familiar being!! It really matters that I was upset....it really matters that I'm happy...that I'm content now...I really matter!!

Before you say yes, remember the first few weeks of your child's life. This is the stage where the babies are in tune to very little more than their most basic needs; and are not particularly responsive to anyone. Remember no matter how much gooing and gagaing you did or how much of a fool you were willing to be, your little baby did very little more than gaze at you blankly... if that. They seemed aware of little besides whether they were hungry or uncomfortable. In fact, newborns don't even realize that they are separate from their mothers- that is, that there are two beings now. Of course, if you just spent 9 months or so being a part of mom, you'd have some difficulty thinking that you're now a separate being.

Initially, babies don't have a sense of self. Remember when your sweetheart was holding onto his or her foot and started to mouth it...then bite it? The look of sudden surprise and pain spread across darling's face, but he/she kept right on biting!! That was because the foot and the pain the baby was feeling were two separate things in the baby's understanding. He/she had no idea that his/her biting was causing the pain! And, often, he/she not only kept right on biting, but also bit harder! Ouch! Only gradually and later do babies develop self-awareness (researchers mention 12-18 months, although many parents may disagree- they may experience this sooner). Do you remember when your baby first started looking at him/her self in the mirror? Earlier, as much as you held him/her in front of the mirror, he/she just looked at his/her image blankly without recognition. Then, one precious day, he/she began making faces at him/herself- especially that delightful and delighted smile. Only when babies have developed their sense of self-awareness, that they can learn how truly special and precious they are.

HOW SELF-ESTEEM IS DEVELOPED

A baby with poor self-esteem? That is a nonsensical statement. Babies just "are." Initially, without a sense of self, self-esteem is not a part of the babies' experience. Within a very short time, however, self-esteem (potentially) begins to develop. How does that happen? It happens- it develops from the simplest of caregiving interactions.



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Over and over, the baby feels hunger, gets uncomfortable in his/her diaper, is startled, and you the mother, the father, the caregiver responds with basic care: food, a clean diaper, a hug, a pat on the back... Over and over, the baby feels, hears, and experiences his/her needs being confirmed as important...he/she begins to fill with a sense of being worthwhile...a sense of being special. And, self-esteem begins to develop. And it grows as his/her primary caregivers delight and rejoice over the smallest gurgle, the little smile (even if it was gas!), the first step, the sipping cup successes (and failures), the steps, the "mama", the "dada", the arm that makes it into the sleeve, the ABC song...and on and on. Nurtured over and over with feedback that their daily living and experiencing the world fill their parents and other special adults with joy. With each message of worth, self-esteem in the child grows. On the negative side, this is why neglect is so damaging to a child's self-esteem. When a child is constantly neglected, the message he/she receives over and over is that his/her needs, feelings, joys **and** anxieties don't matter. In other words, he/she doesn't matter.

SELF-ESTEEM AT ITS HEIGHT

As the baby is cared for, he/she discovers over and over that he/she really matters. He/she grows in self-esteem and he/she grows and grows...and grows into a **TODDLER!!** ...an incorrigible bundle of energy joyously exploring the world. This well-loved toddler becomes the epitome of self-esteem!

Where is Trisha? I haven't seen or heard her for a few minutes. I hear something in the bathroom. There she is... completely wrapped up in toilet paper from head to toe! She is the princess...the elegant lady she saw today on TV today. What a mess! I ask, "Trisha, just what are you doing?" She turns towards me. A great big smile crosses her face. It is as if she is saying, "Aren't I so wonderful?" I try to frown, but I can't; she is wonderful. I try to scold, but instead I say, "Let me get my camera!" It's obvious, she loves herself, and as naughty as she may be (what a mess!), she makes me love her too...she makes me let her know in action, tone, and words that she is something special.

Well cared for children are well-loved children and become self-loving children. Unfortunately, this often doesn't last. Why not? How does that wonderful toddler self-esteem become vulnerable during the preschool years? ...and what we can do to protect it and to build on it?

SELF-ESTEEM BECOMES FADES and BECOMES VULNERABLE

Children develop their sense of self-esteem through your attention to their basic need. This gives them over and over, the feedback that they have worth to you. From these experiences, they realize that since they have worth to you, they must be truly worthy themselves. This is a powerful dynamic. However, it is also a fragile dynamic. While children can learn to love themselves, they also may learn that they are "bad" from the same experiences. Sometimes parents ask, "My child used to be so wonderful -- he/she used to love himself/herself so much. But now, it seems that his/her Self-Esteem has gotten lower." What has happened to his/her Self-Esteem?



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When do you remember first feeling shame? Or not liking something about yourself? I often watch toddlers and enjoy their joy at being- being alive, being active, and being special. They seem to have no cares in the world. They are bursting with positive energy. Any fears that they have are momentary and quickly replaced by some new excitement of being: a new toy, different paint, a different place to paint, painting with a sock!.... a little brother to paint on! But somehow, probably during their preschool ages 2, 3, and 4, guilt and shame and doubt begin to make inroads on their self-esteem. "Oh no! You got paint all over him! What a mess! Oh no!" How essential is this age? It is the beginning of the process of potential self-esteem loss that reaches its zenith during adolescence. I recall a colleague quoting a study that found that while 85% of kindergartners have high self-esteem, only 20% of 10 year olds (4th grade) have high self-esteem, and tragically a mere 5% of high school seniors have high self-esteem. From our personal experiences in high school, many of us know that last figure must be correct. Did your hair ever look right? Was being the cool kid a possibility? Or, a fantasy? Why does that zit have to grow right there in the middle of my head, like a third eye?! Much of our adult lives have been an often difficult struggle to regain the self-esteem lost during childhood and adolescence. I have seen this all too often in my work as a therapist with adults. The good news is that people, both children and adults, have amazing resiliency. We have the ability to grow and be happy despite often tremendously adverse experiences. On the other hand, how wonderful it would be, if it were not lost in the first place. This is certainly motivation to build well, or at least, to not allow as much weakening of children's self esteem in the first place.

FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE- SOCIALIZATION

No matter how much we love our children, and wish for them to fulfill their potential, we must also be aware that fulfilling their potential happens in the real world. In many ways, the real world is not the home. At home, children are loved and adored, and their mistakes, hopefully, are corrected with love and positive guidance. However, outside of the home -- in the real world there are situations, places, and people to do not love your child the same way you do. In the situations and places, there are people who have urgencies, frustrations, needs, and stress that lower, and sometimes even eliminate their tolerance or appreciation of a child exploring the world. The real world means that they need to be able to get along with other people -- even grumpy old Uncle Charlie! Or, that little girl who won't share her tea set. The communities that they need to get along in are after the immediate family, the extended family (such as Grandma and Grandpa's) and neighborhood people, and other communities such as the grocery store, preschool, and the sandbox at the playground. In other words, as they fulfill their potential, they also need to become social creatures. You remember those charming little children? The little smile, that sweet look? How fun they were? How they drew such positive attention towards themselves? These were the children that by personality and social training made other people like them. And, they grow up to be positive adults who are admired and respected, and sought after...whose Self-Esteem are regularly reinforced in interactions with other people. They draw not only guidance, but also positive feedback from other people. Can we help our children develop the skills? Yes, we can!



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Socialization or the learning of skills and behaviors to function successfully with other people is critical to healthy development. Does your child interact with the world without causing harm to him/herself, to others, and the activities of the group? The children and the adults who are successful in doing this, are the children and the adults that are able to function well socially; socially inept people suffer negative consequences their entire lives: the disapproval of others, the lack of inclusion in games, the "we don't like you" reactions, the "your fired", the "I'm leaving you." These can be extremely painful. If these things become a pattern of life, then they become devastating to self-esteem if they are not counterbalanced by more positive experiences (fortunately, **this can and does happen** -- even for adults who have suffered self-esteem loss over many years when they enter into a successful process of growth and health).

Simple concepts such as taking turns, learning to say please and thank you, using a quiet voice, asking before touching, making eye contact, not putting your fingers up your nose at the dinner with daddy's boss, and knowing when to ask a woman if she is pregnant or not! become critical to acceptance from others in communities (and survival with your loved ones!). This socialization happens through feedback from significant people -- both positive and negative feedback about appropriateness of the child's behaviors. This process can also be called "parenting." Frustration, however affects feedback...and the quality of parenting.



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Chapter 2

Feedback, Frustration, and Self-Esteem

"You guys better be quiet! Or... Or..."

*What is it about the car? They can be so well behaved...at home...in the park...even in the grocery store. But in the car? How come my little angels become so out of control in the back seat? Come on... look at the cars... look, there's a cow... a big picture of a car...pretty car... STOP fighting in the back seat!! Daddy's trying to drive. Look at the pretty houses. "Aargh!!" "Stop it!!" "Did not!!" "Did too!!" You guys stop fighting back there! "She started it!" "No, I didn't!" "Aargh!!" "Ow..ow..ow" **Smack!** Don't hit your sister. "She pinched me!!" "Did not!!" "Did too!!" **Smack!!** Quit it out...come on let's sing some songs...Twinkle twinkle little star..."Aargh!!" "Ow!" "Stop it!!" **Smack!** "Aargh!!" **Smack!!** "OW!!" **SMACK!!** "AAARGH!!!!" **"You guys better be quiet! Or... Or... Or, I'll throw you out on the freeway!"***

FEEDBACK ABOUT BEHAVIOR VS. FEEDBACK ABOUT WORTH

The first people to give feedback to children are the parents, of course (later, other adults, children's peers, and society through the media primarily give feedback). Parents need to be aware of how that feedback affects their children. All parents intend to give positive feedback to their children. While we are reminded to give feedback about appropriateness or inappropriateness of the behavior without making negative feedback about the quality of the person -- the worth of the person, ("Hitting is not nice," vs. "You're so bad!") unfortunately, we may stray and give feedback that negatively affects the person's sense of worth. In the stress of their lives and sometimes overwhelmed with frustration, parents are human beings as well. There is a saying, that there's nothing like being a parent to bring up all the garbage that you thought you had taken care of earlier in your life. And to bring it up more intensely than ever before! In other words, the totality of your humanity, both good and bad is evoked in being a parent. It is very important for parents to accept their own humanity -- that they will make mistakes, and being a perfect parent is impossible. And, will actually backfire on you in two ways: it will over stress you and destroy your own Self-Esteem as you fail to achieve perfection, and secondly, you will inadvertently present an impossible model of perfection for your child to also live up to that will deny his/her humanity. Relax! Have fun! Accept reality; the more you accept reality, the more you will be able to deal with it effectively, enjoy yourself, and become the good parent you want to be.

As human beings, children will make mistakes. And as human beings, parents will sometimes express their frustration to the people around them. If you expressed that frustration to your spouse with some negative comment, or threat, or attack, then you might have a fight. This isn't positive (and not much fun either!). However, if that other person is not your spouse but your child, it can be much worse. While your spouse may argue with you and fight back, your child (especially a very small child -- teenagers are another story!) will accept your comments -- will accept your communication as being true. I sometimes joke that children have a cognitive flaw -- that they trust and believe everything their loving adults tell them! Even



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outrageous things.

FEEDBACK AT 65 MPH

I have to admit my own humanity -- one time when my girls (at that time, two and a half years old and five years old) were fighting in the back seat of the car while we were driving on the freeway. They were making me crazy! There is just something about being stuck in a car with two screaming, fighting, whining, crying, screeching kids, that tend to make otherwise sane, loving, nurturing, mature adults become ogres! Told them to stop -- didn't work. Warned them -- didn't work. Tried to distract them. -- didn't work. Perhaps, it was the five or six requests for them to be quiet. Or maybe, it's being stuck in your seat belt. Or maybe, it's that you know that they know that you cannot get to them while you are driving! Hmmm? Anyway, I got finally so frustrated that I told them, "You guys better be quiet! Or... Or... Or, I'll throw you out on the freeway!" What a wonderful dad!... Not! (The other part of that story was that it just so happened that my freeway exit came up at that particular point. So when I began to pull off the freeway, the girls suddenly thought I was for real. They began screaming from the back seat, "No! No! Daddy, don't throw us out on the freeway!"). Was that appropriate? Of course not. Was that understandable? Yes. Does being understandable relieve me of responsibility to do better? No, absolutely not. (Does this incident sound familiar? Probably!). Accepting my humanity -- accepting that I made the mistake, but without beating myself up, allow me to have the focus to find better and more appropriate ways to respond and guide my children.

Fortunately, mistakes can be only mistakes. It is when mistakes happened over and over again -- when they become a pattern of behavior and interaction that they become truly damaging. A mistake is a mistake and can be compensated for by overall patterns of attention and nurturing -- of appropriate feedback. My girls **are** okay today. They were not traumatized -- or scarred. In fact, they think it's a pretty funny story when we talk about it nowadays!

"POTENTIALING" AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Sometimes parents are unaware of how much their frustration affects their communication. They are unaware of the patterns of communication they have with their children. Sometimes the pattern is obscured by very positive intentions gone astray. I remember a parent who said to me, "I don't understand why my son doesn't have high self-esteem. I tell him all the time that he is so wonderful. I tell him that he has so much potential." Potential? By the way, when was the last time someone mentioned your potential when you are actually **fulfilling your potential**? Or, is it usually brought up in a negative context? If you have older children -- especially teenagers, ask them how much they like you and others talking about their potential. If they could articulate it, they would tell you that the only time their potential is mentioned, it's when they **are not** fulfilling their potential. The "potential" conversation only happens when adults want to criticize them for what they are not doing. While some kids may not be fulfilling their potential, they are not stupid either. They know that this is a put down. Isn't this the same at your work? When they talk about your potential?

Later on, I observed that same parent talking to her son. She was saying, "You can do



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that. You are smart enough to do that. I don't understand why you aren't doing better." And as she said that, she shook her head and frowned, her eyes rolled up in her head and she let out a deep sigh. Clearly, this was an ongoing frustration for her. Unfortunately, for her son there was ongoing negative communication coming to him as well. While her verbal communication seems to say that she thinks her son is smart, her nonverbal communications are also very clear. Her nonverbal communications are saying that he is letting her down (she is disappointed in him), and there the must be something wrong with him. This is the inadvertent communication that destroys Self-Esteem. (Note*-- whenever there are simultaneous verbal communications and a nonverbal communications that do not agree with each other, the recipient of the communication always distrusts the verbal communication as the lie, and believes the nonverbal communication as the truth. Her words -- the verbal communication was positive, however, her nonverbal communication -- the shake of her head, the frown, the eyes rolling and the deep sigh was very negative. The son believed the nonverbal communication, and Self-Esteem is harmed... again.)

This parent was completely unaware of how her frustration and poor communication skills were harming him (or, was aware but unable to stop herself, or to do things differently). She was acutely aware of how much she loved him and wanted him to do well. The intention was wonderful and honorable, but execution was unfortunately poor and destructive. How could she do this? Along with knowledge and skills, this is probably the most critical parental issue in raising healthy children. Your ability to do the best for your children; using your intelligence, your love, your resourcefulness, and your skills can be terribly and completely compromised if you do not control or understand your own frustration. Do you discipline from child development theory? Or, from the level of your frustration? Do you communicate love and caring? Or, to you communicate impatience and irritation? Are you stricter with your children when you have anxiety in your own life? Or, conversely, are you more lenient with your children when things are going well for you? Either way, you are being inconsistent with your children. What is okay today is no longer okay tomorrow. What was not okay today becomes permissible tomorrow. And when the child gets it "wrong", the implicit and explicit disapproval enters into his/her world. And, Self-Esteem is harmed. How can we know what is positive and what is negative?



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Chapter 3

The Most Dangerous Question a Parent can ask the Child "Why did you do that?"

Why? Why did I do that? Did you tell me not to run inside? Of course, you told me not to run inside. But you told me that yesterday. And I am an existential child, which means I live in the moment -- in the present only. And yesterday is not relevant to today, and tomorrow doesn't matter either. Before and later are outside the realm of my cognitive understanding.

And, why did I do that? Because, essentially I am a motor kinesthetic child. That means I must move, and I must explore my world with my entire body -- that means I move, and I touch, and seek stimulation. This stimulates my cognitive development as well as my emotional, psychological, gross motor, fine motor, and overall holistic development.

Sometimes your precious child comes running into the room. As he/she comes running into the room, he/she slips on the rug; catches the tablecloth with his/her right hand, causing the flower vase to tip and spill; slaps the baby in the eye with his/her left-hand; **and** crashes his/her head into the edge of the chair. Oh yes -- all while you're on the telephone with the bank (after waiting 20 minutes on hold!). As all heck breaks loose, in frustration, you ask "Why? Why did you do that? Didn't I tell you not to run inside?" Like thousands and millions of parents before you, and thousands and millions of parents after you, you ask the dangerous/destructive **WHY** question. One of these days, I'm going to get me a kid and train him/her on how to answer this question correctly. When asked why, he/she will stand with his/her hands behind his/her back, looked up with doleful soulful eyes and reply in a sweet voice...

Why? Because I am a preoperational child -- remember what Piaget said? That short Swiss guy with the mustache, glasses, and beret? That means that right now, I have a lot of difficulty understanding the rules of the world. Because the rules of the world seem kind of mystical and magical. Besides, yesterday when you were feeling good, you let me run inside. So... the rule it is.. I can run inside?... Sort of... Sometimes... On the other hand, you do have a point. Because sometimes I can't run inside -- that, of course, depends on if you're in bad mood or not.

*Are you in a bad mood? Did the Visa bill come? Why did I do that? You mean, with all your intelligence, and all your experience as an adult, you don't know why I sometimes run inside? I run inside because... because... I am a child. Because I am a child. **That's** why. Don't you remember that I'm a kid? Didn't you notice how short I am?*

Unfortunately, a child is unable to articulate how and why he/she is a child. That he/she does the things that he/she does because children need to do those things in order to grow and develop. And since they do not have access to this kind of answer, they try to respond in the only way they know how. They put their hands behind her back, looked down at the floor, and sway correct gently side to side, and say sheepishly or sullenly, "I don't know." Do we accept this? Unfortunately, often we don't. We may grab his/her chin and tip his/her face towards us. Then scowl... maybe stick a finger in his/her chest, and say in an angry voice, "Don't tell me you don't



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know! You know why you did that! Now tell me why you did that!" Unable to articulate that children act like children, and with "I don't know" made unavailable to him/her in the face by the angry adult, the child is forced to take the only answer that is left-- the answer that will attack and destroy his/her Self-Esteem. Whether he/she says it or not, whether the adult says it out loud or not, the child is forced to think to him/herself that, " Why did I do that? It must be... it must be that... **I am a bad person!**"

Why did **you** ask that question? Don't you know why? Of course, you know why. Because he/she is a child. But why did you ask? Because of your own frustration. And, because you have not taken care of your own frustration, you force your child to damage him/herself. Or, if you have taken care of yourself -- your stresses, your needs, and your own frustration, you can be both the parent you wish to be and the parent your child needs.

THE FOUNDATION OF CHILDREN'S SELF-ESTEEM

The foundation of children's self-esteem is always the significant adults in their lives: their parents and other caregivers such as teachers. The adult's self-esteem and psychological and emotional health underlies the children's psychological health. Like a building with a poor foundation, children's self-esteem will always be shaky and highly vulnerable to environmental influences (peer pressure, the media, abusive people, and so forth) if their parents have not been able to stabilize and develop their own psychological health. As you, as an important adult in children's lives strengthen your own self-esteem- get healthy- learn to care for yourself- learn to take care of yourself, children involved with you will more and more securely venture out into the real and sometimes dangerous world to find his/her own way.

This knowledge -- the knowledge that adults/parents are so critical to the mental and psychological health of the children, can be very intimidating to adults. From a negative perspective, it can just about totally destroy Self-Esteem -- in adults! Obviously this creates a lot of pressure on caring adults. However, this can be seen in a very positive perspective. Unfortunately, there was a time in American psychology that all the woes, all the problems, all the negative aspects of a person's life were based on a very simple psychological concept. That concept, in simple terms, was "Blame the Mother Psychology." The negative remnants of that approach still exist in our society today. Many women (and many men, who go under the alternative concept, "Blame the Father Psychology") experience needless and inappropriate guilt and shame around parent/child problems because of this.

On the other hand, understanding how you are the foundation to your child Self-Esteem can be a powerful tool in promoting both your and your child's Self-Esteem. In future columns, I will spend more time looking at the adult foundation for children's Self-Esteem. I will be presenting what I call the **Seven Adult Fundamentals** to Building Self-Esteem in the Adult-Child System. These will lead up to the **Seven Keys for Children's Self-Esteem**. In next month's column, we will look at the **Four Components of Self-Esteem**. Loving your child and expressing that love with positive feedback is vital to one of the four components that make up Self-Esteem. There are, however, three other important components to Self-Esteem. What these four components



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are, and how to support them in your children will be the topic of next month's column.

TOO MUCH SELF-ESTEEM?

In the last chapter, we discussed how the parents' influence is so critical for the child's development of Self-Esteem. The main point was that parents' frustration and their own emotional/psychological health is normally the foundation to the successful development of Self-Esteem in the child. In subsequent articles, we will look in more depth at how parents previous experiences affect how they interact with their children -- both positively and negatively; and how it sets up the adults to provide support for the keys to developing Self-Esteem for their children. Parents usually dearly cherish their children. Loving children, however, is not enough by itself to develop Self-Esteem in a child. Loved children know their parents cherish them. Being loved and cherished by your parents is a key to Self-Esteem -- most adults who have high Self-Esteem will acknowledge the sense of love that they received from their parents or other significant adult figures. As a result, if parents sense that their child does not have high Self-Esteem, parents will try even harder to develop that Self-Esteem -- try even harder to show the children that they are loved.... may do more and may give more to show them that they are loved. While all this attention (is not to mention toys and stuff!) Is enjoyed by the children, this often still doesn't work, and may even back fire.

Not too long ago, in a national newsmagazine, there was an article that was openly critical of children (and of course, their parents! There they go again... making parents feel guilty again!) who they typified as having received too much esteem -- that they had **too much Self-Esteem**. The article was mistaken. What they were describing was **not** Self-Esteem. They were actually describing what could be called narcissism. They were correct, however, in describing how narcissistic personalities are harmful to them and to society. In the article, they describe children who could not tolerate failure. These children, when they are successful, behave very well and like themselves. However, when they are not successful, they often became outraged and behaved in very inappropriate ways. When disappointed, these children would be extremely angry and act out in aggressive and negative ways. They would, in response to failure do anything to win, be successful, or be the best. They would see themselves as being victims, unfairly treated, and may respond with self-righteous vengeance. Sound like some adults you know? Hmmm? The magazine's theory was that parents and other teachers and adults had given these children too much esteem, that their worth had been confirmed over and over, to an extreme degree without regard to the realities of the world, including the needs of other people in the community.

The article concluded that these children had too much Self-Esteem. And, consequently that too much Self-Esteem was dangerous to children and dangerous to society. In actuality, the children that the article describes were actually children with low Self-Esteem! They were correct in that these children had been praised and been rewarded over and over again by their parents all their lives. Too much praise? Now, they're telling us not to praise! That it is possible to praise too much! That would be a simplistic conclusion. However, there is an important point to be gotten from this. In all probability, these parents and other adults were working from a simplistic



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theory of Self-Esteem -- a theory that says praise in itself (messages of worth, messages of confirmation, cheerleading, and more) is what builds Self-Esteem in children. They were working from an incomplete theory of Self-Esteem; their theory of Self-Esteem is based entirely on what Coopersmith calls significance. However, Coopersmith believes that there are three other important components to Self-Esteem in addition to significance. Subsequent chapters will discuss all the important components to Self-Esteem in more depth.



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Chapter 4

Significance Meets Socialization (& Frustration)

"How many times do I have to tell you?"

*There is so much to do. "What? I told you yesterday. And, the day before. And, last week." (SIGH). Sometimes, I feel like an old tape playing the same old song over and over. Do I really have to tell them again? And again... And again. Why do they ask, if they don't listen? If they don't bother to try to remember? Can't they tell I'm busy? I can stand only so much. "I told you that! Didn't I tell you that? **How many times do I have to tell you!?"***

SIGNIFICANCE ☺

Significance plays a primary role in the development of children's Self-Esteem. Significance is when the people that are significant to you, the people in your world that are important to you, find that you too are significant -- you too are important, and to be valued. In January's column, I talked about how parents when they attend to the primary and most basic needs of the baby, continually give them messages of worth. Messages that their joy, their distress, their desires, their anxiety, and their joys really matter to them. As they receive these messages over and over, babies begin to understand that they must have value-- intrinsic value. Otherwise, why would their parents be so delighted and be so upset when they are happy or sad? From this Self-Esteem develops. Neglect, in some ways, becomes the most profound abuse. The baby experiences in neglect that he/she doesn't matter... at all. Giving positive messages of significance seems to be fairly easy. However, in trying to maintain this positive attitude toward your children, you also have to teach them how to be a part of the community. This is socialization.

SIGNIFICANCE MEETS SOCIALIZATION- ☹

When children are younger -- when they are infants or just about to reach toddlerhood, the messages of their significance that we give them tend to be more pure and more consistent. We implicitly understand that even if they don't do what we want them to do, or somehow do something outrageous or naughty, that they are doing it from the innocence of their age. Thus, we find them adorable -- Trisha was so adorable as a one-year old wrapped up in toilet paper trying to be Cleopatra! We were charmed by their wonderful energy -- he/she is so passionate about everything -- we even joked indicated that Kirstie's favorite word was "No!" So fierce! So cute! However, something happened in the next few years. Our tolerance and our appreciation changed; our tolerance and our appreciation went down. Why is this? How do children lose "adorability?" Do they lose their innocence? Or, are they somehow... now bad? Are they purposefully making our lives more difficult? "Didn't I tell you that?" "What did you do that for?"... And, the question that destroys, "Why? Why did you do that?"

As children grow older, we expect that socialization -- the feedback that we had been giving them as to what is appropriate or inappropriate behavior is beginning to be integrated. Before they did not know -- they did not understand, therefore they could not have complied. They were just babies! Now..... Now, however, they have been told... And told... And told... Now,



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they **should** know! The honeymoon is over. Reality sets in. The stress of raising a young child, balancing time, energy, money, and relationships, often begins to take a toll. The behavior that was adorable -- that was tolerable now takes time and energy. And, there is so much to do. So you tell them again... And again... And again. Finally, in frustration you snap, "I told you that! How many times do I have to tell you?!" Just as I mentioned in the previous column that I wanted to train a child how to answer the "why" question, I want to take a kid and train him/her how to answer the "how many times" question too. After the parent asks -- demands, "How many times do I have to tell you that?!" I want to train a child to respond,

"One time? Two times? Three times? Actually, only a few times. But only if you are for real. You tell me not to run... Or, not to touch. One time. Two times. Three times. But a lot of it depends on how you are feeling. Sometimes, you say it one time and it's for real. Other times you say it one time or 12 times, but it's not for real because you're in a good mood, or you get distracted, or the phone rings, or because we're the grocery store and you don't wannabe embarrassed in front of those other ladies! Or, because my adorable smile is too cute! Sometimes you say it 5 to 10 times and are still not for real! After a while, I finally figured it all out. I became like Charlie Brown in the Peanuts cartoons on TV. You know, when the adults talk to the kids in the Peanuts cartoons... You never hear their voices actually speak words clearly. All you hear it is "Ronk, ronk, ronk, ronk... Ronk, ronk, ronk, ronk..." Then you hear Charlie Brown interpret what they say.

*How many times do you have to tell me that? You tell me one time... You tell me nine times... Yet it doesn't seem real. So I try to figure it out. You see, **it's what you do** -- not what you say. No matter how many times you say it, unless you do it -- follow-through on it, I can't believe that you mean it. Is it for real, or isn't it? So like good ol' Charlie Brown I interpret what you say to mean... Can I figure this out? How? Does saying it one time mean you will follow-through? Or, does saying it five times equal following through? Or does it take 12 times before you follow-through? You said it 20 times once, and didn't follow-through at all! Hmmm? Maybe it's the tone? Volume? Or the clenched teeth? I don't really know. What should I do?*

So, I test you... And test you... And test you... I test you to find out how many times it really takes. But the thing is, you keep on changing it! Good mood... bad mood... busy... lots of time... no time... angry tone... sweet tone... loud... quiet. Different all the time. So what is it? I guess I have to test some more! I wonder what it will be this time... Seven times? How many times do you have to tell me that?

*You know, it only has to be one time, **if it is real each time you say it one time**. You wanna know something else? A lot of the times I keep on doing it, it is me try to tell **you** to be for real... Be consistent... Make it the same amount of times **every** time. It really doesn't matter how many times... it can be just one time, or it can be six times. As long as it is the **same** amount have times **each** time. **How many times do I have to tell you that!?"***

Sometimes when parents are not able to understand the developmental issues of young children, they attempt to socialize to children in ways that do not work. With their frustration dealing with the demands of being a parent of a young child, that is often when the messages of significance to the young child begin to break down. However, if you do understand the developmental



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issues of young children, learn developmentally appropriate ways to socialize young children, and deal with your own frustrations, then you can continue to give positive messages of significance to the young child, while maintaining the sanity of the household... And your sanity too!

SIGNIFICANCE BECOMES "HAVE-TO-DO'S"

Have you noticed that some parents (maybe you!) would jump up and literally dash through the room in order to meet their children's needs. Along with other issues, that your child may feel neglected by you (and Self-Esteem lost) is what drives a relatively simple issue of whether or not to let a baby cry, or to go to him/her into becoming a very difficult and sometimes painful argument. Parents can become terrified that they are not giving adequate messages of significance to their children. If parents believe that children are hypersensitive and hyper-needy -- that failing to feel their every need creates the potential for tragic loss of Self-Esteem, then parents may become hyper-vigilant in trying to meet every need of their children. They feel they have to do everything for their children. They try to be the perfect parent, constantly aware of and constantly striving to meet every need and desire their child has. And, to believe as parents that they must bar or eliminate every anxiety, prevent or eliminate every disappointment for the child.

Cabbage Patch Dolls, Tickle Me Elmos, Furbies, Princess Diana Beanie Babies... eventually become video games and trips to Disneyland; which become Calvin Klein's and Air Jordan's; which become... which become a bunch of very stressed and very broke parents! Children do not die from disappointment; nor, they die when they cry. Certainly, it sometimes feels like you as a loving parent may die when they are crying! We have mentioned before that you do not traumatize children by making a mistake. Making mistakes over and over in an enduring pattern is what causes enduring wounds to a child. In the same way, a disappointment does not traumatize a child either. It is true that a lifetime pattern of disappointments can be destructive; but when you couldn't find the last Tickle Me Elmo, weren't there are hundreds if not thousands of times all through the year when you were able to meet your child's needs? To give something special to your child? All those other times count; this disappointment does not eliminate all the good that has accrued from all the other times. Besides, was Elmo really that cute? (Well... actually, I thought he was! But we survived without him.)

As parents try to be perfect parents, unfortunately, children get another message. Not the message that the parent cares so much about them (although that is experienced), but the message that the parent should and **must** fulfill their every need, and should and **must** protect them from any anxiety, worry, or disappointment. And there develops, instead of the fulfilled happy child, the **tyrant toddler!** Or, the **tyrant teen!** (Or, **tyrant spouse**, oh my!) "I want him... I need... I gotta have... I wanna..." (Remember Violet Beauregard in "Willy Wonka in the Chocolate Factory?") The parent tries so hard to satisfy children's sense of entitlement. And when reality happens, and the parent is unable to fulfill the demands, children who have learned to expect this (learned to demand this), instead feel outraged and betrayed.



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Protected from disappointment, such children never learn how to deal with disappointment. Discovering the reality of the world that does not love them, nor is particularly interested in meeting their every need, nor particularly interested in keeping them anxiety and stress free, such children become terrified of their own inability in the world -- their own vulnerability in the real world. It is interesting to note that these children, who some people characterize as being spoiled rotten, often perceive themselves as victims in the world; as people who has been unfairly harmed. This is expressed in a self-righteous attitude. (At a later time, in a future column, I will discuss the dynamic of developing both the bully and the victim personalities in children.). What can be done to avoid this? Actually, quite a lot.



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Chapter 5

Stress 'em... Disappoint 'em... Frustrate 'em... On Empowering Children

Gotta win...gotta win...can't lose...no!! It's getting close...come on...come on...gotta win... can't let Hardy get this one...stupid Hardy...come on... come on... oh, no! he's getting closer... no...no...can't let him win...no...nonononono!! @#\$\$%^& "You cheated!!" "Yes, you did...you dirty cheater!!" Stupid Hardy...don't smile at me!! "Leave me alone!! This is a stupid game anyway. Big deal...so you won...you cheated!! You...you...you...oh, never mind!!" I hate Hardy...I hate this game... I hate... I hate losing.*

A sore loser? What made this so painful? Would a victory or two make a difference? We want to build powerful children with Self-Esteem, not selfish children cannot deal with disappointment or who have grandiose senses of entitlement. What should we do to help children become powerful? Ironically, for your child's emotional and psychological health, **you need to stress them; to disappoint them; to allow them to be frustrated; and... to be sure that they experience failure!!**

I say this provocatively and purposefully. Stress does not destroy people. Constant unremitting stress can be destructive. Stress is a part of our lives and one's ability to deal successfully with stress defines one's ability to be successful in the world. Avoiding stress, unfortunately, also means avoiding the opportunity to learn how to deal with it successfully. Disappointment is a regular part of life. Sometimes, when the child is very upset and says to me, "But that's not fair!" I respond, "Yes, and when you grow up, you're going to have to pay taxes too!" Of course, life is unfair and full of disappointments! Who said life was supposed to be fair? As the adult, we all have experiences of how life is so unfair. Recognizing that life is unfair -- that is full of disappointments and accepting that (accepting the limitations of life), allows us to move forward in the seizing the power and control in life that we can have. Remember the Serenity Prayer?

Frustration also is no fun. However, it is when a person has been frustrated, yet is able to persevere and still be successful, is when he/she feels the most powerful and gains the most in his/her Self-Esteem. Constant frustration is unhealthy -- but like stress is an important part of the growth process. Everybody wishes to be successful. However 100 percent success is not real. In order to be successful, one needs to be comfortable enough with failure or the possibility of failure. To fail, but yet to survive... To fail, yet to try again... To fail and to persevere and become successful is the most powerful learning. To learn to enjoy failure is unrealistic (and kind of sick!). However to be comfortable enough with failure or the risk of failure is vital to success.

Remember how your toddler worked so hard at getting the puzzle together. There may have been a frown on the his/her face as he/she struggled to make it work. It was so hard not to intervene and to help your child. "No! Self!" he/she insisted, because he/she wanted to do it



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him/herself. Stress was happening, frustration was there; and time after time he/she failed to make it work. Then, after many...many efforts, it all fit together! Remember the look of joy and delight on your child's face. Remember how he/she brought that puzzle to you in triumph? Remember when you do this, and how much you want to share this with others so that they can see your success too? Stress... disappointment... frustration... failure... continued effort... led to.. led to success! And, Self-Esteem grew.

THE MORALITY OF "GOTTA WIN"

There was a young boy who several years ago I worked with in counseling. He threw tremendous tantrums whenever he lost a game. Crying, red faced, screaming, blaming others that they had cheated, throwing the game on the floor, stomping out of the room, and sulking. Sound familiar? Unfortunate, for many parents -- yes. Eventually, his family and his classmates no longer wanted to play with him, or even be around him. The issue for him was not simply that he had to win, but that he hated to lose. More than hated to lose, he couldn't stand to lose.

Losing/failure meant to him that he was unworthy. He could not tolerate that. The danger for him that he "gotta" win all the time was twofold: first, if he always must win, eventually he may not ever try, compete, or play anymore. If you do not try, that certainly is a way to guarantee that you will not lose. The second possibility since he cannot stand to lose, is that he will do anything and everything in order to win -- in other words, he is at risk of becoming sociopathic. If he must win in order to confirm his worth... If he must win in order to have a sense of worth or be devastated psychologically, then the only morality that counts-- the only one that matters is the morality of winning. Other values such as fairness, respect, honesty, and respect become irrelevant. In fact, unfortunately, values such as honesty, fair play, cooperation, empathy, and compassion become obstacles to always winning, and are to be ignored and even despised.

When I supervise or train other therapists who work with young children, sometimes they are shocked when I tell them that when I play games with children in therapy, I often beat them. Their assumption, which is not unlike the assumption parents sometimes have about their children, is that the child is too fragile to tolerate losing. And, if they are too fragile to tolerate losing, that adults must allow them to win. Quite the opposite, I believe that "throwing" games to such children gives them a message that they are too fragile... that they are not powerful enough to handle disappointment, frustration, or failure. Who better to help a child deal with loss than an adult who truly cares about him/her -- to whom the game is unimportant except as a way to help the child deal with his/her issues... Who will not gloat and rub it in their face; or who instead places the game and the consequences of the game in more appropriate perspectives?

With this young boy, we played a lot of games. By now, most adults were so intimidated by the possibility of him throwing a tantrum that they always lost games to him on purpose. I remember the look of shock on his face when after I would not let him win. I would win and he would start a tantrum. I would smile and ask him about how he felt; I would label for him how badly he felt personally... reflecting on how losing made him unworthy in his own heart. Instead of taunting



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him, rejecting him, or refusing to play with him, like his friends might have done, we would talk about it. I would guide him into define his worth whether or not he won. When he would win, he would of course, be delighted. However he could not win all the time since I would not throw games. Because he could not win all the time, he had to learn how to deal with it. We were able to process it and eventually, he was able to handle winning **or** losing. And, because he is able to handle losing, and he is able to continue to play -- to continue to try; and, consider for himself values such as honesty, fair play, cooperation, empathy, and compassion.

THE "PERFECT MIRROR?"

Ironically, many of these parents who so love their children... who would do anything for their children, begin to experience themselves as being unappreciated by their children. They receive tremendous anger from their children because the children feel that their parents have failed them. Worst of all, some parents feel that they deserve the anger and the blame. These parents had recognized that significance plays a critical role in Self-Esteem. And, had followed through trying to give significance messages to their children with enthusiasm and a vigilance that was admirable. They have tried to be what is called in some psychological terminology as being the perfect "mirror" to their children. They had tried to perfectly mirror back worth to their children. This "failure" by the parents causes them a tremendous loss of Self-Esteem. "What else can I do?!" They tend to intensify their efforts to more and more perfectly mirror back to their children their worth. They become the children's greatest cheerleaders and greatest defenders..."Go kid go!" All the while, inadvertently setting their children up, ironically, to lose Self-Esteem. Accept your humanity. It is okay to be what is called "a good enough parent" rather than a perfect parent.

On more positive note, it is clear from experience and observation that children dearly love the appreciation of other people. Their entire being lights up with energy and joy with a smile from mom, a hug from dad, a kiss from Grandma, or a sloppy, slurpy lick from the puppy dog. This remains true for adults. Even as an adult, aren't you sometimes surprisingly pleased that someone remembers your name -- or remembers your hobby or favorite sports team? That they thought that you were so important too -- or were important enough to be remembered? When your baby smiled at you, reached out to you, or said "Mama," or "Dada --", didn't your heart fill with joy? For some of you dads, as much as you understood it, didn't hurt a little bit when baby wanted Mama instead of you? (Time to get junior some more toys!?). It is important to remember that significance's impact comes from people that are significant to the child. The greater significance people have to the child, the greater impact their valuing of the child has. The positive comments and appreciation from a stranger, while they may be nice, do not have nearly the same effect on a child's sense of self as if they were from his mother or his father or teacher -- especially when they are very young. Later, the messages of significance from their peers become more and more important -- this is, of course, another important issue. For the most part, parents are fairly good at getting messages of significance to their children. Most children go into the outside world with a core of Self-Esteem. Unfortunately, we recognize that this is often not enough.



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As much as parents are able to give positive significance messages to their children, this is often not enough by itself to armor their children from the influences of outside world. What happens when there is not a parent around to support the child? When he/she is out with his/her friends? When he/she becomes a teenager?! (Oh my!!) When being significant to their peers become so important? And, when some of their peers' values seem unhealthy or harmful? When he/she becomes an adult? What happens if there's no one there (parent or teacher or supervisor) to motivate the child? Why should he/she be "good", or do the right thing when there's no one there to see? Or, if there is no personal gain? Or, if someone else like a coach or teacher encourages behavior that is against his/her/your family's values?

How do the messages of worth become integrated into a set of values that children carry with them throughout their lives for guidance? The next column will begin discussing what is called moral virtue. Moral virtue is the second of the four components of self-esteem that Coopersmith speaks of. It is the internal parent the each of us carries with us our entire lives. Hopefully, it is a loving and positive internal parent; unfortunately, sometimes it is a more negative and judgmental internal parent. How can we better insure the development of the positive internal parent?



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Chapter 6

Sigmund Freud Meets Jiminy Cricket From Acceptance to Moral Virtue

Sigmund

Yes

It's cool!

Ah, you're always worrying about Mom!

We won't get caught, and it's really easy.

We have to do it. Everyone else is doing it.

We'll be the only ones not with it.

Come on...it'll be fun!

Chicken!

We'll be like the big kids!

You're being a "goody goody." YUK!!

I like being cool. That's who I want to be

Freud

No!

It's a bad idea. What would Mom say?

Yeah, and you're always getting us into
trouble.

Dad says doing stuff like that always leads to
bigger problems

I don't care about everyone else.

No! It's not right!

No!

No!

I don't want to be like the big kids. I don't like
being sneaky.

I like being good. That's who I want to be.

You're a bad boy!!

SELF-ESTEEM RESILIENCY -- ACCEPTANCE TO MORAL VIRTUE

Last month, we looked at how significance -- the messages of worth that are given to children by the significant people in their lives, is so powerful in creating Self-Esteem. As parents are able to take care of their own needs and give to their children the acceptance messages that they need, their children Self-Esteem tends to grow. However, parents realize that they cannot always be there to support the children. That they cannot always be there to always confirm to the children that they are important, and that the things that they do are valuable and appropriate. Children not only need to feel loved by the significant people their lives, but also to feel love for themselves. From the movie "The Greatest" comes the song about Muhammad Ali, "The Greatest Love of All" sung first by George Benson and more recently, by Whitney Houston. In this song, it said, "the greatest love of all, is to learn to love yourself." Well-loved toddlers live this song's message totally!

While we enjoy how toddlers seem to love themselves so much, we also notice that some toddlers are more vulnerable to the negative and positive opinions of others. In addition, there are some children and some adults who fail to love themselves. For some of them, it is clear that their low self-esteem comes from a lack of the positive messages from their adult caregivers -- a lack of messages of significance from their significant people. On the other hand, why do some children and some adults fail to love themselves -- who do not have self-acceptance, despite being well loved and admired by many other people? Also, there are those children who



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clearly love themselves when they are younger, but lose that love for themselves as they grow up? The critical question becomes how do toddlers, children, and adults develop the emotional/psychological resiliency to continue to love themselves (the core self-acceptance) despite the sometimes esteem-harming negative socialization that they experience? How can parents armor children to develop Self-Esteem **and** to keep that Self-Esteem? Part of the answer lies in another of the four components of Self-Esteem -- in what Coopersmith calls moral virtue.

JIMINY CRICKET AND YOUR SUPEREGO

As children grow up, they develop a sense of what is right and wrong. They develop a group of values... a set of shoulds and should nots... what a good boy or girl and what a bad boy or girl does... a pattern of behaviors that is virtuous. This is what makes up their morality, their conscience, the superego (from Freud), the Jiminy Cricket (from Disney's Pinocchio!-- following Pinocchio and guiding him) that tells children and adults whether or not their behavior is appropriate or inappropriate. This set of values, of course is developed from the guidance of their parents initially; later, from the influence of other significant adults such as teachers; eventually, more and more as they move toward adolescence, from their peers (oh oh!); and continually, from the messages of the society at large -- especially from the media. This is why little boys and little girls continually ask, "Is that good? Is that bad?" or "Is he/she a good guy? Is he/she a bad guy?" Children from their youngest look to their parents for guidance in the world. "Should I touch that? Is it too hot? Will it hurt? Will he be mad? He/she nice?" As a consequence, children's morality initially is made up of their parents' morality.... **and** of their parents' frustrations, fears, and, unfortunately, their parents' hang ups, prejudices, and ignorance. Children need not only to learn the morality of their parents (hopefully, a positive morality), but also to be able to internalize it in a positive manner.

Children accept the morality of their parents and their own. However, the natural process of growing up causes them to question that morality. This is healthy if there is a healthy core morality that the child will make adjustments to as he/she lives life. This, however, can be dangerous if the core morality is not healthy or is fragile. In addition to getting the approval of their parents and other adults, children need to be guided to also be able **to give themselves approval** for their decisions and behavior. In the community of other children, and later, in their future communities as teenagers and adults, they will not be getting the approval of their parents (who cannot be normally present). In fact, they may be getting the very clear disapproval of the others in the community. "That's dumb!" "You did what?" Their ability to feel good about themselves will be dependent on their ability to make the decisions that allow them to follow through with what they feel they should do. In choosing to do what they feel they should do, they will often feel the disapproval of others. Their ability to approve of themselves -- to accept themselves is critical to their Self-Esteem.

THE IDEAL SELF VS. THE REAL SELF

The ideal self vs. the real self are very powerful concepts to help build the sense of self-acceptance -- to develop the powerful moral virtue that allows children to maintain their Self-Esteem into and through adulthood. The ideal self is the composite of all the good things that an



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individual wants to be; it is the definition of the person who totally lives up to the values that he/she holds dear; it is the good... no, the **perfect** little boy or little girl... the perfect person that each person wants to be. The real self, on the other hand, is made up of what each individual actually does. If the ideal self says to be kind and giving, and the real self is able to be kind and giving to a friend, or to a stranger, then Self-Esteem goes up. The real self has been able to live up to the standards of the ideal self. However, if the ideal self says to be kind and giving, and the real self is not kind and does not give... to he is/her little sister... or, for example, to that homeless man on the corner, then (no matter what the political perspective, how much theory about alcoholism and drug abuse one possesses, or how many other ways the individual gives to charity and even perhaps directly gives to organizations that support the homeless) there is a mismatch between the real self and ideal self -- there is tension between the real self and the ideal self. And, with this tension, Self-Esteem tends to go down. In other words, even as the ideal self seeks to be humane, the real self is human. Failing to realize and accept the humanity of the real self causes a loss of Self-Esteem.

With these two concepts, there become two directions with which to build your child's Self-Esteem. First, is to build the ideal self in a manner that is healthy and productive. Some individuals' ideal self are... stupid! Or, even worse, dangerous. For example, in the adult world, there are parents who define being a good parent as being the perfect parent... who define good parenting as never allowing their children to have stress, or feel disappointment... who define being good parents as never expressing anger at their children -- to never raise their voice. These parents expect themselves to be perfect, and in doing so, deny their humanity. In denying their humanity, they create an unrealistic and unattainable ideal self. And, as the real self fails to live up to perfection, their Self-Esteem plummets. What kind of ideal self is unrealistic and dangerous to a child? One only has to look at how adults express their frustrations at their children. As they try to over manage their children's behavior, parents guide their children to define a distorted ideal self. If children acquire ideal selves that says they should be able to sit still, touch only with their eyes, remember what was said two weeks ago, not be sensory motor, speak always in a quiet voice, eat their vegetables, not stare when they are curious, learn to read before they are four, never spill, love to bathe, be able to suppress their energy, remember to put things away, be able to anticipate parents' moods, get straight A's, to "know what I mean!"... their ideal self may not allow them to be fallible children! (For some children, some of these things are impossible, and you practically have to tie them down to get them to be still, or force feed them intravenously to get them eat their vegetables!). They will be in continual danger of failing the ideal self the parents had given them -- they would be in continual danger of failing themselves. On the other hand, if parents can guide their children to define a healthy and realistic ideal self, then children will be able to fulfill themselves and develop and keep Self-Esteem. Such an ideal self would include a child that makes mistakes but continues to strive; who has energy and passion and develops appropriate boundaries for expressing them; is sensitive to others but respectful of him/herself; who has a joy for living and learning; and, although he/she may not eat his/her or vegetables all the time, takes good care of him/herself with an healthy lifestyle. In other words, a good person -- not a perfect human being; someone who accepts his/her her humanity; and, is a good citizen in the community.



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Striving to meet the standards of the ideal self requires developing skills and other traits. This can be conceptualized in the development of the real self. If the ideal self is realistic and healthy, then the real self can be developed to meet its standards. If the ideal self is supposed to express itself but with understanding and compassion, then the real self needs to develop healthy communication skills. The real self would need to learn how to say please and thank you, how to appropriately use eye contact, adjust the tone of their voices, use or avoid physical touch as appropriate, and understand personal space as it is culturally and individually defined. The real self would be trained to recognize differences between one situation and another situation -- including the cultural demands of different communities: of the library vs. the grocery store; of the school vs. the home; of home vs. Grandma or Grandpa's; of a particular ethnic community vs. another, and adjust their behavior to fit. The real self may need to learn how to express itself physically in ways that are effective personally, but are not intrusive to others' needs, and are socially appropriate.

If there is an ideal self need to be powerful, the real self needs to find a way for that power to be expressed in a healthy form -- which may be as a leader, and a builder, or perhaps in martial arts among other ways. If it is accepted that the real self cannot sit still and needs to be sensory motor, then the ideal self can be adjusted to say that the individual will take care of these motor kinesthetic needs in appropriate ways. Then the real self can be trained to find ways to physically active appropriately -- gymnastics, dance, soccer, football...or, running around in circles around the tree! The match and mismatch between the ideal self and the real self creates crises for children, but they also create the opportunities for real growth.



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Chapter 7

A Crisis between the Ideal Self and Real Self "I can't do that to my friend!"

Are you my friend? Yes.

Will you always be my friend? Yes.

What do friends do? They are nice to each other.

Will you be there for me? Yes.

I'll be there for you. I know.

Are you a true friend? Yes.

What is a true friend? A true friend won't leave you for another.

Are we buddies? Yes.

Are we all buddies? Yes.

Will we be all be friends even when we're older? Yes.

Friends forever? Yes.

Forever? Forever.

A MIDDLE SCHOOL CRISIS

A couple of years ago, my daughter, Trisha faced a crisis regarding her ideal self and real self. She along with several other girls had grown up together since Kindergarten. The girls had always gotten along relatively well. However, it was now middle school. And as happens often times in middle school, preadolescent and adolescent dynamics begin to take place. In this particular case, several of the girls decided that they were the in crowd -- the "cool" girls. Many women remember this time with a great deal of pain when some clique deemed them worthy or unworthy. In order to have an in crowd, you also need to have an out crowd -- or, at least a scapegoat. My daughter was not picked to be the scapegoat. However, one of the other girls, Shelley was picked. Like Trisha and the majority of the other girls, this girl had grown up with the others since Kindergarten. Everyone had more or less gotten along with Shelley even the normal personality conflicts that kids can have.

Now, however it was different. It was a very difficult time for Shelley: the "cool" girls talked about her, shunned her, and let her know in so many ways that she was inferior to them- rolling their eyes, a snicker here, a snide remark there, a snort, a look... Given all the intangibles that make up one's rank and status, Trisha could have joined in with the in crowd. She had status as a high achieving academic student, and as an athlete because she played basketball -- at this school, basketball was a big deal. We have heard about the clique through the school grapevine. When we came to school one day, we noticed that Shelley was by herself on one side of the courtyard while the in crowd girls were on the other side, happily and smugly feeling superior. We noticed that our daughter Trisha had not joined the in crowd, but had instead stayed with Shelley; she was the only girl who had stayed by Shelley.

Later on as we were driving home, we asked Trisha what was going on. She replied "Oh, those



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girls, they think they're so special. They're being mean to Shelley." We asked her, why wasn't she hanging out with those special girls -- the in crowd, the elite clique. I will always remember the look on her face when she heard this question. She had a look of surprise on her face and she replied, "I can't do that to my friend." I was stunned... Wow! And proud. She couldn't do that to her friend... She couldn't abandon or betray her friend!! It was so obvious to her that she shouldn't do that. But, it would have been so easy to do that to her friend. She had stopped herself -- something had stopped her from doing that to her friend. Most of the other girls **had done it** to their friend! I told her, "I'm very proud if you. Not just for being nice to your friend. But because you chose to be a friend even though in doing so, you put yourself at risk to have those girls be mean to you too. I'm glad you made the right choice. But I'm even more impressed that you had the courage to make the right choice. Because, you know, I don't know that when I was your age if I would have had the courage to stand by my friend like that and risk being ostracized. And, you know what else? There were adults right now, who still don't have the courage to be a friend like that. You should be very proud of yourself." A small smile spread across Trisha's face, and there in the car, it seemed that I saw Trisha visibly grew larger and more powerful. (Whenever I remember or recount this story, a lump grows in my throat and my eyes become misty! I'm getting misty next to my keyboard right now! Oh my!... Out of the mouths of children!).

When Trisha had said "I can't do that to my friend," she was not responding to the situation because of her mother or father or some teacher had told her that this was the right thing to do. Much more importantly, she had internalized a set of values about what it meant to be a friend. To do other than stand by her friend would not have been a rejection of other people's values, but a betrayal of her own values. Her concern was not that she would seem less worthy in our eyes, but that she would have seen herself as less than she wished to be. Her ideal self had said that as a friend, it meant she had to stand by her friend. Whether or not Shelley was worthy as a friend was not relevant. For Trisha it was about Trisha -- who she wanted to be. And, her real self stayed with Shelley even though it meant personal risk to herself -- a personal risk she could easily avoid by hanging out with the "cool" kids.

When children and adults have well thought out and secure ideal selves, whether or not there is anyone else to watch them or to judge them, they hold themselves to the ideal self. They hold themselves to act in a manner consistent with the values of the ideal self. To not do so would be detrimental to their sense of Self-Esteem. Even as this challenges them, even as this endangers them, their self-definition still requires them to find a virtuous way to act. They search for a way that the real self can follow through. Moral virtue encourages behavior in a person that allows him/her to accept himself/herself because he/she can behave in a consistent manner. Moral virtue is what a person carries with them when there's no one around (especially when the parents are not around) to contend with the tremendous pressure and influences in the world that would tell them to do other than what is virtuous. Jiminy Cricket had reminded Pinocchio to hold fast to his moral virtue when he was tempted by the immediate promises of Pleasure Island.

THE IDEAL SELF/REAL SELF -- POWER RANGER VERSION



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How does the middle school child find the courage to follow their moral virtue guidelines? When it happens, is because as younger children, moral virtue was encouraged to develop in a healthy manner. Many values are presented to a young child to internalize. Parents are not always conscious of which values are internalized. Some values are internalized, but are internalized in some distorted fashion that can be harmful to the child in the long run. Potentially harmful ideal selves can be developed. For example, as was discussed in last month's article, some children have an ideal self that says you have to win. Once an internalized ideal self is developed, it is difficult to change it. Criticizing it usually creates resistance, since you're attacking core values -- a core definition of self. Never attack someone's ideal self, if you want any chance of being heard! (How could you be so stupid? Don't you have any morals? Why would you want to do that?!) When a parent or an adult can identify the ideal self in the child, however, then he/she can challenge that ideal self positively and provocatively. The trick is not to criticize it, but to challenge it in order to raise it to a higher and more sophisticated level. This is done by first affirming the most basic motivations of the ideal self.

For example, if your little boy (or girl) wants to be a Power Ranger (**Hai Yah! Punch! Kick!**), and as a result, has been kicking and hitting other children (**Hai Yah! Punch! Kick!... Ouch!**), you might not get as far as you would like if you tell him that he is wrong to behave like that. Although you are addressing the behavior, he will experience you telling him to deny a powerful motivation from his ideal self. However, if you recognize that the underlying trait that is so appealing in Power Rangers is their... Power! you can get to adjusting his behavior through addressing his motivation. Instead of attacking his desire to feel powerful, you should confirm this. After all, having power is always an appropriate goal for any person -- whether a child or an adult -- male or female. This is why children, especially boys in our society are so powerfully attracted to toys and games where they can exert or practice power and control in their lives (or imaginary lives). The issue is, however, whether or not having this power and exercising this power is done in a manner that is appropriate and does not cause harm to other people (that is, is it socially responsible?).

"You like Power Rangers don't you? Power Rangers are very powerful. That's cool. I like the Blue Power Ranger. Which one do you like? They are so strong and powerful." It is important to distinguish the underlying motivation -- the desire to have power in this case, from the behavior that is expressed. After affirming the underlying motivation (Power), then you can define more appropriate behavior that is socially acceptable for expressing this motivation. "You know Power Rangers solve a lot of problems. Did you notice that they always try to solve the problems first by talking? And, you know something else? The Power Rangers, when they practice, they are very careful not hurt each other. They only hurt the bad guys, and only if they have to. They practice having a lot of control with their fighting."

Sometimes setting a boundary about not hurting each other works just fine. Other times, however, it doesn't work effectively by itself (note -- this is not to ignore the importance of clear, firm, logical, and strict boundary setting in discipline). When setting boundaries about not hurting each other does not work, the next thing we usually try is to be stricter -- set tighter



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boundaries and more extreme consequences. Unfortunately, strict boundaries and aversive consequences often don't work. It may not work because it does not address the very compelling underlying motivation -- the desire to be powerful. Or, it may work to stop the behavior, and leave the child feeling impotent -- with a sense of powerlessness; and/or give the child the message that having power is inappropriate. The boundary of not to play fight may, in fact, deny the child his/her need to experience and experiment with issues around power and control. By accepting the ideal self (the desire to be powerful) but redefining it (to power with control and responsibility **and** boundaries), adults open the possibility of getting the real self to behave in a more appropriate manner (playing Power Rangers without hurting each other). "You can play Power Rangers, as long as you don't hurt each other. Here, you can use these pillows to be the bad guys. You can hit and kick them. But you can't hit and kick each other. If you can't play Power Rangers without hurting each other, then you cannot play it." If after this, the child is still unable to play Power Rangers without hurting other people, the parent can be clear and confident in following through with whatever appropriate consequences that have been set. The learning about the ideal self, and the real self has been presented and followed through with from the parents' side.

In later chapters, we can discuss additional issues around setting boundaries and consequences (including the differences between consequences, punishment, rewards, and positive and negative reinforcement) along with a discussion around the Four Theories of Timeout.



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Chapter 8

Using the Ideal Self vs. the Real Self "You're going to let them play you like that?"

Forget them!! Forget school!! Stupid teachers...stupid principal... stupid deans... They've never respected me, so to heck with them. Just when I'm starting to do better in school... just when... Well, never mind, I'm not going to hang around for them to kick around. Always on my case...always criticizing me...always making me wrong. They say they're trying to help me. Well, maybe some of them, but most of them... stupid teachers!! They're messing up all the time. I don't hear them on each others' cases. Adults stick together even if they're all wrong. I'm not sticking around for more mess. Stupid adults! Forget them. I'm outta here!!

Looking ahead to adolescents, I would like to give you another real-life example of the ideal self vs. the real self as a way to work with children. Although the focus of most of these articles will be around younger children, there are many issues that parents get away with young children that they cannot get away with teenagers. In other words, you can get away with a pattern of mistakes when children are younger, but when they become older, **you** will pay the price! Many of the great difficulties of raising adolescents can be precluded with effective parenting with the children are younger. Some discipline approaches that seems to "effective" with young children have harmful consequences that do not appear until they become teenagers. For example, it is often "effective" to over control and dominate a child when they are younger. You can disrespect their needs and force young children to do what you want them to do. However, when they become teenagers, the over control and domination becomes more and more intolerable, and they can become oppositional and defiant. In other words, sweet little kids don't suddenly and inexplicably turned into monstrous teenagers! Sometimes, difficult teenagers are a consequence of problematic earlier parenting. Understanding this, can lead both to more effective discipline when they are younger that is respectful of issues of control and power, and also to effective interventions even when there has been a history of (usually inadvertent) disrespectful and disempowering actions that has created a difficult teenager.

There was a very talented therapist that I supervised that worked with a teenage boy who had a fairly negative history in the school. He had been on the verge of being kicked out of school several times. His parents, to be honest, were alternately worried about him and being sick and tired of him. He had been placed in Special Education as well. His Self-Esteem was not very strong. Fortunately, because of the support he had gotten from certain caring adults including the therapist, he was beginning to feel better about himself, and to look forward to do better academically and career-wise. However, as often is the case, he still got into trouble at school sometimes. After one particular incident, the school was on the verge again of kicking him out of school altogether. He felt that it was very unfair -- he was outraged! As often happens, he was ready to quit. He felt disrespected; he didn't like being told what to do -- he especially didn't like being threatened. He was ready to say to heck with all of it, and to slam the door on high school. The standard approach would be to encourage him to stay in school, to accept



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responsibility for his behavior, and try to work things out with school. The standard approach would **not** have worked. He was too upset. He had been through all this all too many times. They were attacking this sense of Self-Esteem again. They were jerking him around!

What were the underlying issues that could be used to help him make a better choice? Adolescents, like adult, have a lot of issues about power and respect. He felt that he was being disrespected by the school. He also felt that all he could do to assert his power was to leave -- and to leave in as loud and angry a way as possible. These two underlying motivations were the keys to working with him: respect and power and control. As he complained about the school, and said that he was ready to forget it, using some principles that we had discussed in supervision, the therapist challenged him. She challenged his self-respect; she challenged his sense of power and control. She activated his ideal self by challenging his need for respect and power.

She accused him, "You're goin' to let them play you like that? You're goin' to let them win? That's not too smart. You get mad, walk out that door -- no matter how loud you leave -- no matter how much noise you make while you go, remember... after that, you're on the outside and your education was left behind. You quit -- they win! Those school officials win because now they got rid of you. They already have their education -- they already went to college-- they already have a career. You won't have nuthin'. They would have won -- they would have suckered you into losing your education -- into losing your future. And you think you're so sharp!?! You goin' to let them do that to you? You goin' to let them manipulate you! Or, are you smarter than that? Who's in control here?" With this, the young man got very upset, but upset in different way. His eyes got big, his nostrils flared, he set his jaw... he practically jumped out of his chair! "No way! No way! Ain't no way, they're going to make me give up my education! I'll show them! **I'm going to graduate! Ain't nobody goin' to keep me from graduating!!**"

I want to acknowledge that using the idea of "them" can be somewhat controversial. This seems to confirm his negativity toward adults, or to agree that adults, specifically school officials were against him. In his existential experience, however, they had been against him. By using "them" as a reference point that he understood, the therapist was able to get into his reality -- his sense of what was happening in the world to him. From that empathetic connection, he opened to consider what she had to say. At that time, her clinical judgment (and I concur) was that it was necessary in order to be heard. If she had taken the standard line (that he was responsible, and that the school officials would be reasonable and had his best interest in mind), he would have dismissed her like he had been dismissing all the other adults. The result of that would have been him quitting school and losing his education. She was willing to take a chance in order to save his future. If this failed, it would have made no difference -- to therapist referring to adults to as "them" would not have made him anymore or less suspicious of school officials. By violating this unspoken rule -- that all adults are supposed to back each other up no matter what, she was able to get him to stay in school, and eventually, to develop a greater trust in adults. To be quite honest, I feel that breaking such a rule in order to have a chance at saving a



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person's potential- to help this young man have a possibility of a future is not a hard choice.

Now that he accepted the redefinition of his ideal self -- that his ideal self could continue to demand respect and power, but would get it from staying in school rather than leaving school, the therapist was able to ask him what he was willing to do to make it happen. In other words, what was he willing to do in order to stay in school. Since he wanted to graduate (that graduating served his ideal self-definition), he became receptive to working things out so that he could stay in school. While he still resented certain limits that were placed on him, these limits which he used to consider as controlling became less important to him. It was more important to him to control his life so that he could graduate from high school. Where before any feedback on his inappropriate behaviors was perceived as an attack on his ideal self, now he was willing to get feedback on more successful ways to achieve the new ideal self that would not be controlled or manipulated. Now he was willing to adjust his real self behavior so that he could fulfill his ideal self goals. There was much more to this process than can be discussed here, but this is a real success story. As he adjusted his real self behavior, he became more and more successful academically and socially. His grades and Self-Esteem continued to grow. Then, as his Self-Esteem grew, he was able to take more and more responsibility for his behavior -- even to the point that he could be critical of his "immature behavior" when he was younger (all of a half a year ago!). Two springs ago, he graduated from high school! He is now in a community college continuing his education. So, who won? Everyone did! Caring adults were able to help a young man succeed. And, a young man was able to get his real self to live up to a more sophisticated and healthy ideal self. And, hopefully, he will carry his ideal self with him through the rest of his life and he faces more challenges.

The therapist in this situation seized upon a great opportunity and made a difference in this young man's life. These opportunities occur all during a child's life. It is up to adults to recognize them and take advantage of them.



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Chapter 9

Teachable Moments for a Positive Ideal Self and Real Self "Teddy"

Mine. My Teddy. NO! Mine. My Teddy. Don't touch. You can't touch. Mine. NO! My Teddy. Get your own Teddy. Mine. NO! Don't. My Teddy. My Teddy. Mine. Uh uh. NO! Go away! I don't like you no more! No more! Go home! My Teddy. NO! NO! NO!

Educators often speak about what are called "teachable moments." These are the moments in children's lives where the circumstances are such, that children become open to learning about themselves, others, and about the world in general. Their natural curiosity, their desire to solve problems, their need for stimulation, and sometimes, their anxiety, their needs, and even their fears are so powerful at these points, that they open themselves to instruction and input from their significant adults. The teenager I discussed in the previous column that was on the verge of being kicked out of school was in a teachable moment. Teachable moments occur naturally in children's exploration of and involvement in the world. Adults who are vigilant and look for these opportunities (including seeing opportunities in moments of intense stress), can have tremendous influence on a child development.

Good teachers and effective parents can also facilitate teachable moments by introducing new things into their lives; by introducing children to new experiences, or, simply, by being excited themselves. Adults, however, need to take care that during the teachable moments that the children learn things that appropriate. As opposed to learning things that are positive, adults may inadvertently facilitate learning that may be negative, or that only serve children in the short-term but not the long-term. Or, serve short-term adult needs for order and management, but inadvertently teach children principles that may be harmful for them in their lives.

A GUEST... A SPECIAL TEDDY

Consider this scenario. Your child has a friend over to play. Your child and the friend are both very excited. Everything is going well... Until the friend wants to play with your child's special teddy. Your child doesn't want to let his/her friend play with the teddy. Both of them are getting upset. This is the teachable moment -- your child is very emotionally invested in this moment, and will be receptive to your input (which, by the way, does not mean that they will like your input or agree with what you have to say!). You might say, as many parents have said, "You need to share your teddy. You invited your friend, and this means your friend gets to play with your toys. Don't be selfish." What have you taught? What has your child learned? Your child has learned a **concrete rule** about social etiquette-- that the guest should have certain privileges, and the host should have certain responsibilities. That the guest gets to play with your toys; and the host has to... has to... suffer!... I mean, to give it up! You have defined the ideal self with specific real self behavior. But to follow the ideal self values, does your child have to perform this particular real self behavior? You might add, "Be a good friend. That's a good boy/girl." Now you have defined the ideal self (a good friend) as someone who shares his or her toys. And,



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because your child does not want to share his/her teddy, they cannot be good. Unfortunately, you may have inadvertently forced your child to conclude that he/she is a bad boy/girl! And, you may have also ignored and/or also taught your child to ignore his/her own personal needs -- in this case, his/her need to have something that is personal and sacred for him/herself only. In the extreme, this can lead to self sacrificing behavior that does not take care of one's own needs -- at all; in the adult world, in the extreme this could be called co-dependence.

The parent can still promote the same type of behavior (regarding social etiquette regarding the guest), but can use this teachable moment to also build the ideal self. The parent might say, first acknowledging their child's need to have something special and private, "That is your special teddy. I know that it is special for you. It's hard for you to share it with your friend." In the previous response, the child's needs were ignored. In fact, if the child had tried to assert his/her feelings, by saying "But it's my teddy!" it would not have been surprising for the adult to say, "Don't be so selfish!" This denies the child his/her feelings, and makes it so that when he/she tries to assert his/her feelings and needs, he/she must accept a negative label. It becomes impossible for the child to achieve the ideal self standards. Not surprisingly, children often react to this sullenly, "But I don't want to!" Parents attack began, "Don't be so stubborn!" and the ideal self is denigrated again.

On the other hand, the parent might say "I know it is hard for you share your teddy with your friend. It's hard to share when is something so special that you want it for yourself. I know you want your friend to have fun. I know you want to be nice. You like being nice, don't you? If you want to be a good friend, then sharing your teddy would be a good idea. Can you share it with your friend? That would be so nice." It is clear from this that the parent still wants the child to share the toy. The difference is that having to share is not presented as an absolute rule. Instead, is presented as behavior (that the real self might do) that reflects an ideal self of a friend who wishes to be nice to their friends. This makes it possible to not share the teddy, and still consider oneself a nice person. The previous, more rigid approach precluded this possibility.

THE IDEAL SELF IS NICE -- THE REAL SELF SHARES TEDDY... MAYBE!

It is important to note that in this particular scenario, I do not necessarily feel that a child should be forced to share his/her special toy with his/her friend. You can be a good friend, a good citizen, and a socially responsible individual in the community, and have some things that are private and personal that are not to be shared with others. This definition of the ideal self includes an ideal self who also takes care of itself -- that being sensitive and responsible to others can and should balance with self-love and self-care. If at this point, the child can share his/her teddy, then great. If on the other hand, the child is not able to share his/her teddy readily, perhaps the real self can be guided to find a way where he/she can share the teddy. For example, if the friend shares his/her own special toy with your child, perhaps your child can share his/her special teddy with his/her friend; or that they play a game together with the teddy; or, the friend can play with it for a limited time; or the child possibly be given a special treat or privilege in exchange for his/her sacrifice. If your child at this point is still unable to share his/her special teddy, don't force him/her to allow an intrusion into his/her special relationship with the teddy.



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If you stop here (your child has refused to share), since the real self has not shared, then it is implied that the ideal self cannot be honored -- hence your child must be a bad boy/girl. To avoid this and to develop the ideal self and real self in healthy ways, the parent may ask, "Since you can't share your teddy with your friend, and I know you still want to be a good friend, what can you do for him/her that would be nice? Is there something else really special that he/she can play with that is okay for you?" This allows the child his/her feelings, encourages them to have and develop a healthy ideal self, and trains the real self in developing positive pro-social behavior-- behavior that does not have to be rigid. This approach also encourages your child to be creative in finding the real self behavior that is positive.

Realistically, as the adult, you may be required to provide suggestions (and, perhaps some boundaries too). With all this, you may still end up forcing the issue if your child is absolutely unreasonable. While this may sound contradictory, you must remember that striving for the development of the healthy ideal self never means allowing a toxic real self to operate. For example, if after inviting a friend over to play, your child refuses to that him/her play with any of the toys-- that should not be allowed. The short term selfishness in the real self may get the child all the toys to play with. It can become internalized in the ideal self. However, such behavior if it continues in the child's life will result in social sanctions against him/her. For the long-term, it is against the child's best interest to be allowed to assert truly unreasonable and negative behavior. Finding a balance between selfishness and selflessness is the key -- a difficult key.

Understanding the differences between the ideal self and the real self offers tremendous guidance into working with people of all ages. I have been able to use it in positive ways with young children, teenagers (even oppositional and defiant adolescents), parents, couples, families, schools, organizations, and businesses, including supervisors and supervisees, bosses and employees. These articles, themselves are also presenting ideal self and real self issues as we examine how to raise young children.

STILL MORE!!

Significance and moral virtue were two of the four components of Self-Esteem described by Coopersmith. Last month's and this month's articles were devoted to these two components. Your children feel loved and valued by you and the other significant adults in their lives, and you are consciously and actively supporting the development of their internalized values that will make up the moral virtue that would guide them throughout the rest of their lives. However, there is **still** more to developing self-esteem in your children (by now, you may have figured out that there is always more!). Next, we will begin discussing the third component of Self-Esteem as described by Coopersmith- power and control, which we have begun to allude to.



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Chapter 10

POWER AND CONTROL-THE STRUGGLE POWER CRAZY KIDS?

*"Ahhhhh!" A scream rips through the house. It's coming from the living room. "No! Stop it!" What is it now? "Ahhhhh! Stop hitting me!" You come out of the kitchen. It's Volume 54 No. 12... in the ongoing serial saga, "The Battle of the TV Remote Control," the epic struggle continues. "It's my turn! You chose last time. I hate you! Mommy! Make her stop!" "Make **him** stop!" What do I do? Who is right? Who is wrong? Who cares? (Not me!) They act like Rug Rats vs. Bugs Bunny is a life and death choice! If I let him have the remote control, she feels betrayed and gets sullen. If I let her have the remote control, he will say he doesn't want to be my kid anymore and throw a tantrum. If I turn off the television, they both hate me! Is he right? Is she right? Am I going crazy? Are **these** the joys of parenthood!? Ahhhhh! I think King Solomon would have cut the dang remote control in half!*

As much as children feel loved by the significant adults in their lives and as much they hold themselves to behavior that the ideal self has designated as being moral, their Self-Esteem still requires for them to have a real sense of **power and control** in their lives. Often times, adults or teacher consult with me about discipline problems. Intuitively the adults realize that there are power and control issues at play. However, upon closer examination, it often becomes evident that the discipline problems are more **management problems** adults have with children's attempts to get power and control. Management problems are situations where a child's or children's behavior is outside of the control of the adults (which, like it or not is a lot more of the time than you think) **and** affects the environment in a way that is disruptive physically or emotionally to the adults or other children (in other words, they make you nuts!). Oftentimes, a child is actively seeking more power and control in his/her life and, unfortunately, does it in a manner that is disruptive to adults. Sometimes it is disruptive to the adult because the adult him/herself has issues with power and control. (And now this little character is messing with my power and control -- who does he/she think he/she is? I thought at least with my own kids, I could be the boss! Bummer!)

Are children supposed to seek power and control in their lives? Of course they are! The desire to have power control is a lifelong venture. A better education, a good job, better income -- these are all things most adults struggle for throughout their lives. And as they are successful in gaining these things, people are able to have greater power and control in their lives -- gaining the lifestyle they desire, a nicer house, a better neighborhood, the quality of schools for the children, and so forth. Even the struggle for the nonmaterial benefits in life -- serenity, fulfillment, security, a sense of purpose, or spirituality can be seen as gaining power and control in your life, but power and control in your emotional and psychological life. In other words, as children push for power and control in their lives at home, on the playground, at school... at the grocery store and at the... oh no, Toys "R" Us!, they are developing the skills for their lifelong



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adult struggle for power and control. The key here for children and also for adults is whether or not in their struggle for power and control, they do it in the way that is socially responsible. In other words, are other people harmed? Are other people's rights ignored? Are other people respected? Do other people lose their power and control as they assert theirs? Are you making me crazy!? Do you eat out where you want all the time while your partner does not get to satisfy their culinary desires? Do you get a promotion while your colleagues get stiffed? Do you get to keep playing with the truck while your little brother gets... to cry in the corner? Do you honor or betray your ideal self in gaining power and control?

TODDLER TYRANTS TO PETTY TYRANTS/BOSSSES TO.....?

The need to take care of your power and control issues is so compelling that many people will develop an ideal self that places power and control as an absolute first priority.... no matter what the cost. A cultural attitude that promotes gathering power and control can develop that taking care of No. 1 at the expense of others is acceptable -- even desirable. In fact, being particularly vicious and cold hearted becomes something to be admired and celebrated... "Ooooooh...that was cold!" As the bad guy who falls into the pond of piranhas and is eaten alive, James Bond, Agent 007 smirks suavely and says, "Bon Appetite." A theater full of spectators laughs with admiration. A linebacker makes a tremendous hit on a receiver crossing the middle, and as the player lies unconscious on the turf, he stands over him and taunts him, "This is my house, boy! Don't you think you can come into my house!" 70,000 people in the stadium cheer, millions more watching on TV go "Ooooooh!" and the linebacker gathers additional All-Pro votes. Heather Locklear on "Melrose Place" (or Joan Collins on "Dynasty", or Betty Davis) is deliciously vicious, cruel, and vindictive.... and celebrated for years with high ratings. Mike Tyson, Donald Trump, Bill Gates, and innumerable politicians keep us fascinated, at least in part, because of the power (physical, financial, or political) they seem to have. And, adults wonder how kids can be so power crazy -- so cruel, and are so attracted to violent shows and video games!

Teaching people how to "swim with sharks" encourages being the most intimidating and voracious predator with amoral and sociopathic principles. People begin perceiving the world as being split between winners and losers-- with the implicit and sometimes overt message that losers are just getting what they deserve. And, being the winner is getting what I deserve because I grabbed it first! Or, have it now! Or, can intimidate you into letting me keep it! Or, can violently keep it mine! Many people feel this way whether it is a toy, a parking space, or land or property.... Whether it was fairly gained or violently seized... Whether it was a recent acquisition or a historical, colonial, or imperialist conquest. This becomes codified in the sayings prevalent in our society: "Possession is nine tenths of the law." "The golden rule -- he who makes the rules, gets to have the gold." "Might make right." "That was then, this is now!" The parents' version of these slogans become "Because!", "Because I'm the mommy/daddy!", "...or else!", "Because I said so!" The children's versions of the slogans become "Mine!" "I don't care!" and especially, "**No!!**"

TOILET TRAINING BECOMES A STRUGGLE FOR POWER AND CONTROL

Power and control is such a fundamental issue with children and adults that people do seemingly



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unreasonable and even outrageous things to gain it -- even to gain the **illusion** of it. Some of you may have experienced this when toilet training your children. For those of you who have not toilet trained your children yet, pay close attention! For those of you who have been through this, you may be able to gain a clarity of principles that will help in future (there will be versions of these conflicts throughout childhood and adolescence). Sometimes infants and babies experience being over controlled by their parents. Parents decide what they wear, what they eat, what time to get up, what time to go to sleep, who they can play with, what they can play with, what they can do with their bodies, and sometimes even what they are supposed to feel and think. Well-intended parents may "reason" with their child and continually force them to do things that inadvertently cause them to lose their sense of power and control. In other words, parents continue to work on them until they wear them down enough so that the kids finally just give up.... give up just to get away from the hounding. "Just this time" becomes virtually all the time. Having lost control to the parent, children will seek ways to get a sense of control back. How they do this varies from child to child and depends on many things including developmental stage and temperament. Toddlers may assert control and power over the last thing that they have -- the only thing that parents cannot manipulate or control, their pee and poop!

You made me wear that yucky shirt. I don't like little hearts anymore -- I like ponies, not hearts!

I like peas. I like carrots. I hate broccoli! You made me eat that nasty stuff!

I didn't want to get up -- I was still sleepy. What's an appointment? All I know is that it's something that makes me wake-up when I don't want to.

I don't want to nap! I don't want to nap! I hate naps! I want to play! Grrrrr! I'm not tired -- you'd be grumpy too if someone tried to make you nap when you didn't want to!

I don't want to play with yucky Johnny. I don't like yucky Johnny! I don't care that yucky Johnny's mother is your friend. I don't like yucky Johnny!

This is fun. Hitting the bowl with a fork makes a neat sound. Whatcha' mean? Don't play with the fork? It's fun! Hey... Give it back!

Mmmm, that feels good.... Mmmm, real good! Mmmm! Mmmm! What? Mmmm! Don't touch? Why not? Mmmm... Because what? What's nasty?

Auntie Judy smells funny. And, she pinches my cheeks and gives yucky kisses! And she gave me that yucky shirt with the hearts... I'm supposed to feel grateful? That's yucky... she's yucky!

*Yucky yucky yucky! I'm **wrong** to feel that way? That's what you meant? That's what you want? I knew what you wanted!? I knew what you meant!? You know what I was thinking!? I was thinking what!? I was trying to get away with what!? Sheesh!! Can't I do anything!? Can't I even feel what I feel... or think what I think!?*

That's it!!** You make me do all that... you tell me what I feel and think... that's it! There's only two things left I have control over -- only two things you can't take away... can't control. **It's my pee! It's my poop!** You can't have it when you want it! You can't make me put it where you want it! It's mine! **It's mine!

In mainstream American society, toilet training is usually begun somewhere around 2 1/2 to 2



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3/4 years of age. Successful toilet training is usually accomplished somewhere around 2 3/4 to 3 years old or slightly older. This varies a great deal from family to family and from culture to culture within mainstream American society and cross-culturally in non-mainstream American societies and non-American communities. Generally speaking, this is the age range when children are now physically able to control their bowels and bladder; language skills have developed enough so that they are able to both understand communication from the parents and to communicate back to the parents; cognitive abilities have developed to the point that they can understand the process and the need; and, social development that supports the process has occurred (social situations where toilet training is required have become desirable -- such as preschool). Children who were toilet trained earlier than these ages, may be developmentally precocious; or, (more likely) are physically highly regular as to when they have bowel movements and urinate; or, (even more likely) they have exceptionally well trained parents! Sometimes, exceptionally well trained parents can be counted on to anticipate toileting needs and put their child on the toilet quickly and effectively enough so that it seems that the child is actually trained. In those situations is arguable about who actually has been trained! In my experiences working with young children and parents, when toilet training prior to two and a half has been "successful", it is often the result of extreme vigilance and very hard work; in other words, the vigilance and hard work is compensating for the child being marginally developmentally ready to be toilet trained. An important question here is-- Is it worth it? For some parents it is, and for many others it is not. The other important question is-- Is it worth it for the children? Or, is it stressful or even harmful to the children?

AND THE CHALLENGER IS... AN ITTY BITTY LITTLE KID!

On the other hand, when a child's toilet training is not completed successfully (allowing for occasional accidents) by about three to three and a half years of age, it is often because there are major power and control issues between parents and children. By not doing the only thing that cannot be physically forced upon or from him/her, the child asserts control and power. Since he/her cannot control the other parts of his/her life, at least, this can be the one thing that can be controlled. And, in controlling this, the child can get some power and control at least by aggravating the parents! "Maybe I can't get candy. Maybe I can't get out of the playpen. Maybe I won't get the La La talking TeleTubby. But, I can make Mom crazy! I can. I can make Dad's veins pop out! I can.... and his eyes bug out! I can. I can make the whole family wait...and wait...and wait -- I can... I am... powerful! I am the boss! I win!" The "winning" comes, unfortunately, with major negative consequences: implicit and overt negativity from the parents that affect children's self-esteem, frustrated and increasingly intolerant parents, and many practical implications that affects their social growth.

What can parents do? Parents must first acknowledge their own issues with power and control. Imagine your itty bitty little kid in boxing shorts with humongous boxing gloves squared off against you the parent also in boxing gloves. A power struggle? How silly! And worse yet, you're losing! You're in a power struggle with a runt, and you are losing! Ridiculous! If adults find that their interactions with children become power struggles, then something is fundamentally wrong for the adults because of their own issues with power and control in their



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lives. Unresolved issues with power control can contaminate the parents' perspective of their children's **developmentally appropriate struggles for power and control**. Remember, it is said that there's nothing like becoming a parent to bring up all the emotional and psychological garbage that you had thought you had already taken care of! And, to bring it up with an intensity that had never been experienced before! However, while it is developmentally appropriate for your child to struggle for power and control, it is **not** developmentally appropriate for mature adults to have power struggles with children. Who said we had to be mature to have babies!? Physically mature -- sure; emotionally and psychologically mature too!? Oh my! I used to ask my community college child development class to come up with a list of 10 requirements to become a parent. The students, aged 20 to 60, most with children and some with grandchildren came up with some excellent requirements. However, when I asked the class if they as individuals had fulfilled these requirements before they had become parents, very few said that they had been "qualified". As a consequence, most of them and most of us learn to parent on the run -- an on the job training process where we help our children deal with their issues including their power and control issues while we are still dealing with our own power and control issues. If you can accept this (actually it doesn't matter whether or not you accept this -- it is still reality!), you can take responsibility for it and parent more effectively.

So children are supposed to seek power and control. Does that mean we're not supposed to discipline them? What if they are abusive? What if they are doing dangerous things? Power without sensitivity... control without responsibility is dangerous politically, socially, within the family, and for individuals. You want to raise a child with Self-Esteem -- that includes a sense of power and control, but you don't want to raise a tyrant. Setting boundaries around power and control becomes critical.



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Chapter 11

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

THE CONTAINER -- BOUNDARIES AND LIMITS

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

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

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

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

It is within this container of boundaries and limits that the child or the person can be freed and should be freed to exercise appropriate power and control -- to make personal choices. Consequently, in a sense (within certain limitations of respect and safety), it almost doesn't matter



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How strict or how lenient the boundaries are or are not. What matters is that the boundaries are consistent. With consistent boundaries, the container is set clearly, and children and people can function safely within the container of boundaries. When there are inconsistent boundaries, the container is ambiguous and dangerous, and children and people are never sure whether it is safe, permissible, risky, or dangerous to do this or that.

MAKING CHILDREN MAKE THE "RIGHT" CHOICE

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

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

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

"GOTCHA!! GOTCHA!! GOTCHA!!"

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



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other ways to gain a sense of power and control.

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

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

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

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

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

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

A COSTLY "VICTORY"

Aggravating mom, frustrating Dad, stealing paper clips from office, coming in late to work, doing the paperwork (sort of), taking your break... and then using the restroom, rolling your eyes, a sigh, slumped posture in the chair, gossip, and insulting the boss (behind his/her back) are all examples of **passive aggressive behavior**. The common elements to all of these actions are: first, they are all aggressive in seeking to harm the other person, not physically, but emotionally or psychologically; secondly; are overtly nonspecific -- there is not always an obvious overt target (even though, it may be obvious to whom the actions are intended) -- they are indirect; and third, can be claimed to be nonaggressive but still serve to equalize (symbolically) the power and control deficiency. Unfortunately, none of these behaviors establish true power and control --



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just an illusion of power and control. And, worst of all, they take the place of behaviors that could potentially gain true power and control in the person's lives.

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

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



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Chapter 12

IMPACT in POWER and CONTROL

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

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

No, I hate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches!

How about a tuna fish sandwich?

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

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

I don't know.

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

I don't want soup.

You want me to make some macaroni and cheese?

You know I'm sick of macaroni and cheese!

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

No!

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

EXPLORE AND EXPERIMENT

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

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

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

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

Do you remember when your baby was too small to stack blocks up but delighted in knocking



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

How often do you set up opportunities for your child to have a sense of power and control? To have choices? How often do you help your children recognize when they have exercised power and control -- that they have made choices? It may be as simple as saying, "Look, you knocked down all those blocks!" or, "You put all the blocks in the basket!" In other words, from your actions and your decisions, you have had impact on the world. It is normal for very young children to have physical challenges (fine motor and gross motor) in creating and making constructive impact on the world. This is the underlying issue in developmentally appropriate practices in a child's and a person's development (as it is applied not only to physical challenges but also to cognitive, social, emotional, and psychological challenges and task).

Developmentally appropriate practices assert that people can function successfully within a range of functioning/skills according to their natural maturation. Asking or pushing children to function outside of their developmentally appropriate stages risks overwhelming stress and harm to Self-Esteem. For example, expecting a three-year-old to read fluently, a two-year old to be toilet trained, most eight-year-olds to stop their play and put themselves to bed at 7 p.m., most 10 year olds to understand that the principle of being a good friend includes sometimes not going along with your friend, many adolescents that respect also means giving respect even if you feel disrespected, and so forth may be outside the developmental ability of the person.

Unfortunately, many adults ask children inadvertently to function at higher levels of developmental ability than is realistic. When this happens, children experience a lot of stress and a lot of failure. If the failure continues and accumulates, children may turn to negative ways to



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experience success.

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

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

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



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Chapter 13

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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learns from his/her own; and the fool does not learn despite continued mistakes. The wisdom that we seek to give our children usually comes from our mistakes -- mistakes that we made while ignoring wisdom being offered to us!

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

BEANIE BABIES BUDGETING

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

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

We warned both of them to be careful with the money and not to spend it all early in the month. They **said** they understood. The first week, they both bought some clothes for school. The next weekend, Kirstie saw the cutest Beanie Babies! Three cute Beanie Babies! Three cute **retired**



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

LEARNING OPPORTUNITY VS. PUNISHMENT OPPORTUNITY

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

Often times when you explain something to children, it seems that they do understand. However, the full implications are often beyond them-- often beyond their experiences. We were not interested in punishing Kirstie for not understanding completely. We were willing for her to take the consequences once she had a real chance to understand. Sometimes it is impossible for a person to understand until **after** they have had the experiences (remember, only the wise learn from other people's mistakes!). We could have let her miss the dance (and be meanie parents!). However, the lesson about choices and future consequences, not going to the dance or not, was the issue. So we sent her off to enjoy the dance with her friends... and hoped that the lesson was learned. If it wasn't learned... oh my! Some people can learn when consequences are staring them in the face. Others when consequences hit them in the face! For some, only after being hit several times! And, unfortunately, some never learn.

A couple of weeks afterwards, she said she needed a new outfit for the school's winter concert. We told her to manage her budget over the next three months to make sure that she would have enough money. No extra money from us -- she had used up all her slack. Initially upset, she



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eventually accepted this and began to make financial plans. She was very pleased about the outfit she ended up with -- and even more pleased that she still had money afterwards! We were all fortunate that Kirstie only had to face but not experience negative consequences in order to learn. It would have broken our hearts to see her suffer, but we would have allowed it. There have been other times when we did. Those times are never easy, but they are critical to helping developing an appropriate sense of power and control and high Self-Esteem.

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



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BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

Chapter 14

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But, if she said yes, her daughter would be at a Beastie Boys concert! With three friends and 12,000 strangers! With stadium seating! (Stadium seating is no assigned seating. Your child would be one among 12,000. Even if you wanted to find him/her, it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.... a haystack of Beastie Boys, oh my!). She knew her daughter had no intention of doing anything inappropriate. She was going with friends -- good responsible friends. Saying no would imply all the responsibility speeches and the promises of greater independence and trust for 15 years were but a bunch of elaborate lies. The last thing she wanted



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to do was to betray her daughter. She desperately wanted to be able to say yes to her daughter. But... the **Beastie Boys!**

YES, BUT...

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

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

MAKE ME AN OFFER I CAN'T REFUSE!

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

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

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

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

FROM A NEGATIVE PROCESS TO AN AFFIRMATIVE PROCESS



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

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

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

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

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

Not all parents would come to this solution -- many parents would feel that 15 is too young to go to a concert (especially a Beastie Boys Concert!) regardless. Boundaries vary from family to family. The principles here are much more important. Whenever the actual decision, learning that power and control should be gained with responsibility to others' needs is critical to the healthy development of self-esteem. Parents who continually restrict and restrain their children, inadvertently take away children's sense of power and control, leading to rebellion and defiance. On the other hand, when children are respected and given choice, they are more willing to



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accept the boundaries. How children can come to accept parental decisions and "magic pills" will be discussed next.



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Chapter 15

MAGIC vs. REALITY and RESULTS in POWER and CONTROL

“TAKE ONE CHILD... MIX IN...”

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

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

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

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

THE MAGIC DIET PLAN

This or that self appointed expert (who me!?) always will present to you the magic plan -- the perfect prescription on how to raise the perfect child. There are often sound research and logical theories in these prescriptions. However, like all prescriptions or diet plans there is always the unspoken component. The basic diet plan is take in less calories or the right calories (eat less or eat the right food) and burn more calories (exercise more)... with vegetable or meat and egg... cabbage soup!!.. the "eat anything you want" (yeah, right!) version... tofu versions, nonfat, low-fat, and high-fat versions, and so forth. However, there is always a third component to a diet.

Stay on the stupid diet! Duhh! Why don't people stay on their diets? Will power? Or, something much more complex? The complex issues of body image, cultural and gender norms, distinctions between nourishing and nurturing, nutrition, body chemistry, body type, and especially, emotional and psychological issues (including depression and self-esteem) can make staying on any diet overwhelming. Oh my! Looking for another diet is easier! And for many people, much less dangerous than examining why their body or weight is so important to their sense of worth. In the same way, some parents are continually looking for another magical



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parenting plan rather than examining their core sense of ability and worth as parents -- as human beings.

MAGIC PILLS AND MAGIC WANDS

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

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

SHALL SHE DANCE? -- HOLDING ON AND LETTING GO

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

We could not really know what was going on when she was at the dances. It **was** uncomfortable to give up control. However, making good choices cannot be only talked about, it must be allowed to be experienced. We sent her off with a smile, gritted our teeth and held our breaths! When I came to pick her up, I was always relieved to see her safe and sound where we had



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agreed for her to be. It was like when she took her first faltering steps as an eleven month-old child. Should I let go? Is she ready? Will she fall? Will she be hurt? Should I hold on? I'm was afraid then too. I held my breath then as well, but I did let go because I knew she could not learn how to walk on her own if I held on. The questioning of how much to hold on, of the need to let go, of that agony of letting go repeats itself over and over throughout your child's upbringing. It's amazing that I ever get enough oxygen into my lungs as many times as I have held my breath... and will hold my breath!

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

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

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



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Chapter 16

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

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

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

OKAY!?

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

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



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was that the little boy was **not** okay!

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE IT....?

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

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

NEVER BE LIKE THAT

Often times a child's distress ignites adult distress about their ability to protect their children, and/or an over identification and over empathizing with the child's distress. I worked with a Dad who was having difficulty putting his three-year old daughter to bed. He did not rush her to bed, nor was he trying to avoid the interactions (leave it to his wife). In fact, he relished the time together. He was a very involved dad who wanted very much to be emotionally available and connected. His father had been the classic provider who took care of material needs but did not know how to be emotionally connected. He disciplined harshly- sometimes abusively and terrifyingly. As a little boy, Dad had sworn that he would never be like that -- he was going to be a good... no, a great dad! And here he was in the bedroom of his youngest being available and being connected. And, stressing like crazy! They would do the entire routine: bath, washing up, bedtime stories, tucking her in, night lights, door slightly ajar, special kisses, and so forth. Then she would want more time, another hug, one more story, one more question, another shadow, and on... and on... until the 15 to 20 minute bedtime ritual became an hour, an hour and a half, and more.



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

WHO'S NOT OK?

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

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



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Chapter 17

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

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

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

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

THE RIGHT TO FEEL

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

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



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

ONE MILLION FISH IN THE SEA

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

IT'S OKAY TO BE NOT OKAY

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

SELF-MEDICATION

As teenagers (sometimes as preadolescents) and as adults, people turn to self medication in order avoid overwhelming stress, depression, and anxiety. Self-medication can come in many forms. It can be essentially behavioral -- behaviors that allow one to forget or to avoid intense feelings: workaholism, excessive and compulsive exercising, or thrill seeking behavior. Or, chemical self-



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

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

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

Intolerance of intense feelings can lead to self-medication and the loss of opportunities to gain maturity. Being able to have intense feelings **and** to have healthy resources and skills to alleviate their negative aspects are critical to emotional health. As parents, being emotionally present and available, nurturing and accepting are critical to helping your children develop the skills and resiliency to cope with pain. There will always be difficult times. One's ability to tolerate the pain well enough and long enough is essential for time to pass; and skills and resources to be applied. How does one develop the ability to tolerate pain? The only way is to experience pain and survive pain. In order to have healthy self-esteem, every person needs to be able to become competent at being uncomfortable! To become comfortable (enough) at being uncomfortable... at being not okay -- at least until they can gather themselves to deal with the discomfort. Resiliency is a key to self-esteem and a major key also to avoid developing a victim mentality or personality. In later chapters, we will start looking at victim personalities, beginning with the frustration they cause for caring people. Now, we will look at competence



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and its relationship to development.



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Chapter 18

COMPETENCE and DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICES

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

STOP IT - STUNT IT

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

DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICES

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



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he/she gradually increases his/her abilities in many areas. These are delightful to observe. However, every once in a while, your baby will do something new and wonderful that is fundamentally (qualitatively) different.

FROM BABBLING TO "BALL"

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

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

BASIC RULES OF DEVELOPMENTAL THEORIES

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

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

Development is progressive. The challenges and successes (and the failures and incomplete accomplishments) of earlier development build for (or cause problems for) future development. For example, the development of secure attachment with primary caregivers (normally, the parents) give individuals the ability to risk and succeed at attachments with in subsequent relationships. Conversely, insecure attachments with primary caregivers make it



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difficult for children (even as adults) to form secure attachments.

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

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

Satiation of developmental needs helps individuals progress developmentally.

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

KEITH, GO PLAY IN THE WATER

Keith was driving everyone crazy. He was always in the water or something wet. He was always either being a mess or making a mess! The adults, of course wanted things to be neater, and were always telling Keith to cut it out. "Keith, stop playing in the water." "Keith, get out of the water." "Keith, stop making a mess!" Keith was driving everyone crazy. And, everyone was driving Keith crazy! Keith was responding to a powerful internal need in the sensory motor stage of development. When an individual has a developmental need, he/she normally explores and experiments with that need until it is satisfied. By telling him to stop it all the time, the adults were inadvertently frustrating his developmental process. Keith could not choose to do or not do it; playing with water was a compelling need. And everyone kept stopping him from satisfying it! If he could only satisfy himself, he would stop himself. When we figured this out, I told the teachers to stop disrespecting Keith -- to stop disrespecting his developmental energy.



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

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



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Chapter 19

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

SO DIFFERENT -- ASSIMILATION AND ACCOMMODATION

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

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

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

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

As people experience the world and try to make sense of it, they move into more mature stages of development. Piaget believed that there are four major stages of cognitive development: approximately birth to 2, the Sensorimotor stage; 2-7, the Preoperational stage; 7-12, the Concrete Operations stage; and 12 and up, the Formal Operations stage.



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

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

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

LIGHTNING BUGS AND LIGHTS -- PREOPERATIONAL TO CONCRETE OPERATIONS

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

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

From 2 to 7, they gradually acquire more rules about how the world works. They develop schemes (rules) like object permanence (objects or people continue to exist even when they are



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

EASY COME... BIG TROUBLE!! FORMAL OPERATIONS

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

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

We can not give our children exact instructions to deal with all the circumstances and people that they will experience. So we try to give them the logic with which they can make the decisions. However, the development of this abstract logic depends on children experiencing consistency throughout childhood (from the sensorimotor stage through the preoperational stage and through the concrete operations stage). Consistency means that if A then B, it happens virtually every single time. Without consistency, there is not the basis from which the child can discover underlying logic. Even with consistency, developmentally it is difficult to understand abstract logic significantly before age 12 or so. "Didn't I tell you...?" Maybe you did, but remember what I can and can not understand (and other words, my developmental comprehension maturity level)? Recognizing your children's intellectual (cognitive) stage can help you avoid making



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them feel incompetent, and help you frame developmentally appropriate communication. Significance, moral virtue, power and control, and competence make up the four components of Self-Esteem. How they interact and are dependent upon each other is important to understand.



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Chapter 20

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

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

The Golden Boy!? Samuel's feels depressed?

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

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

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

EVERYTHING EXCEPT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT -- Missing Significance Feedback

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

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

The first people who are significant are parents. Then other family members, teachers,... and peers. If any of these people implicitly or overtly disapprove of the child's behavior, despite living up to their own moral virtue (or reflecting social standards), how competent they are



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problem solving and gaining power and control, self-esteem would be shaken. Also, being ignored when doing well, can be just as damaging. Ever been in a job situation where there's no acknowledgement for contributions -- only criticism for messing up? Self-esteem and employee morale goes down.

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

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

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

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

Alice has always been a very good kid... attentive and respectful to adults, especially her parents. She got along with everyone. Alice expected a lot out of herself and was able to live up to her standards. Since middle school, she had been doing volunteer tutoring and working as a candy striper at the community hospital. At 16 years old, she was clear that she wanted a professional career helping people. She had the grades to pursue a career in a human services profession such as social work or psychotherapy. A well loved and well-respected individual, with a strong and healthy moral virtue, and highly competent, Alice was also very frustrated with a growing sense of helplessness.

Alice had been offered an internship at a community health clinic. Although she would be doing



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

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

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

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

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

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



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seven fundamentals of the foundation (**YOU!!**) to building the self-esteem in your child.



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Chapter 21

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

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

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

STILL SUFFERING

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



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Self-esteem in children is the psychological and emotional health of the parents. There are seven fundamentals to this foundation.

#1 KNOW YOURSELF

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

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

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

#2 BEING A MODEL OF SELF-LOVE

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



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

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

CHOICES TO SURVIVE -- YOUR GHOSTS

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

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



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

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



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Chapter 22

"BENEFITS" FROM BEING A VICTIM

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

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

THE VICTIM MENTALITY/PERSONALITY

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

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

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



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

LOLLI AND TOOTSIE OF THE POP FAMILY

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

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

"YOU'RE SO GOOD AT BEING HELPLESS!"



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

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

THE DUEL THEORY OF FRAILITY

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



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their children.

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

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



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Chapter 23

CHARACTERISTICS OF VICTIMS- The Chicken and the Chicken Hawk

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

THE CHICKEN SPENDS ITS WHOLE LIFE...

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

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

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



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harassment!

THE CHICKEN HAWK SPENDS ITS WHOLE LIFE...

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

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

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

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



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that is their fault.

ANXIOUS VULNERABILITY

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

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

PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE...

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

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



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

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



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Chapter 24

HOW VICTIMS ARE CREATED

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

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

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

THE VICTIM DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS -- THE PREDATOR STRIKES

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

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



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

NOW, THE SAVIOR STRIKES

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

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

THE LOVING THIEF AND A SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

The greatest harm is when these messages become a self-fulfilling prophecy. By continually



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

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

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



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

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



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BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

Chapter 25

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN BULLY

PARENT SAYS AND DOES

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

CHILD HEARS AND EXPERIENCES

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

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



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

BULLIES, AGGRESSION, AND THE SEARCH FOR SELF-ESTEEM

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

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

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

"WHO ARE YOU LOOKING AT!?"

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

UNCARED FOR & UNABLE TO CARE

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

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



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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



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more functional male groups is distorted to 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. However adults definitely do need to



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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's 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 recognize 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 do not harm yourself, others, or the process of the community. Letting Kelli indulge and 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

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



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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.

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



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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.



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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 get presents? What way do American men tend to give 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 least 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
- F) all of the above

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



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seemingly relevant stereotypes. Yet, there are many people who clearly have transcended them and live lives according to their own 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!



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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 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 vulnerability, then true intimacy and connectiveness is achieved. Girls and women are trained to do this to build relationships. It is also



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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.

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



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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 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



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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!



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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 led 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, that even individuals



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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 interpret individuation as independence, which leads to ever earlier preparations for adulthood. In other words, starting adolescence earlier than ever. A



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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 one's physical role in the family work force. Taking care of oneself first with further intellectual development could result in the disintegration of the family and 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 not 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 upon (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 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.



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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 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



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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.



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



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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 order to serve them. And, will be either devastated that others won't automatically kowtow to them, or will be outraged and feel completely self-righteous and entitled to punish the "perpetrators". Upon punishing them, will then be surprised that they won't be



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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?) Pokemon 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 worst 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 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



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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 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 never 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



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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.



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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? Rassel? 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.

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



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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.

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...



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“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, 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!



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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.



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Chapter 31

HONEY, I LOVE YOU... BUT I DON'T LIKE YOU!

My sweetheart! I love you... so much... but... You're my darling... my sweet lovey baby, but... You're the sunshine of my life, but... my reason for living, but... my reason for being put on this earth!! But... you're making me absolutely NUTS! I love you but you can make me so mad. First, you do this, then you do that... then you do this AGAIN, and that AGAIN! When I think that's all under control, you come up with brand new stuff! You're so creative... so creative at taking simple and safe stuff, and making it exciting, messy... and dangerous!! And that look you give me when I tell you to stop... you know what I mean... that "duh... whatcha-talk'n-about? Bambi innocent look." Stop it! Just stop it! You're making me mad... you're making me not like you! You're making me feel like I betrayed you because I forget I love you sometimes and really really don't like you. And, that makes me feel like the worse person in the world... or, at least, the worse parent in the world!! Honey, I love you... but I don't like you! Aaargh! What's wrong with ME!!

Many loving parents get caught in this dilemma. They feel that loving their children must also mean that they must always like them as well. And, try as hard as they can, there are times when they get so upset and frustrated that they not only don't like them, they also forget they love their kids. Some parents find this so disturbing that they try to deny the reality to themselves and to their children. However, their children can still feel the frustration and anger. They often can see through the denials, and subsequently experience their parents being hypocritical. Or, if the children can't see through it, they become confused. Their instincts and experiences of not being liked is contradicted by their parents' insistence that they still like them. Remember, when the verbal and non-verbal parts of communication don't match, it is the verbal part that is normally dismissed as the lie, and the non-verbal communication experienced as the truth. "Mommy loves you always (even though my voice is getting shrill, my eyes are squinting, my jaw is set, and my body full of tension)." Forced to deny their experience as they are told (intimidated) by their parents, children begin to distrust their own perceptions. Denying reality always costs.

THE FANTASY PANTS

Many people have, what I call "Fantasy Pants" in their closets. Sometimes they are "Fantasy Skirts" or "Fantasy Dresses." They are the "Fantasy Pants" because it's a fantasy that you're ever going to be able to fit yourself in them ever again. Every once in a while, I have to replace my "Fantasy Pants" with a new pair, because they've gone delusional!! Denying reality will always cause pain and waste energy. Try and put those pants on... the 32 inch waist size on your 34 inch waistline. Pain and wasted energy! Why would people subject themselves to go through such agony? Usually, because they have an ideal self that is unreasonable and unattainable. "Hmmm, 48 year old man wanting a 24 year old man's waistline. Likely? Realistic? NOT!" (See articles V.1.7 [Ideal Self vs. Real Self](#) & V.1.8 [Play You Like That](#) for a more complete description of the ideal self). This grandiose ideal self asserts that the loving parents they aspire to be would always keep the love in their heart so pure that they would never lose that love even temporarily... much



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less actually not liking their own children. In other words, they decide that being a good parent means being a saint! Well, most parents aren't saints, and neither are their children! Being a good parent is not about being superhuman. It is about accepting your humanity and sharing that humanity with your children while honoring and fostering their humanity. And, a part of being human in human relationships (especially, with someone you are deeply emotionally invested in) is getting frustrated at, getting angry at, and even forgetting your love and like for those special people in your life.

DISTINGUISH LOVE & LIKE

It is important to let your child know that you will never fall out of love with him/her, but you do occasionally fall out of like with him/her. Parental love is always and unconditional (hopefully) at the deepest and most fundamental levels. With that love comes the desire and mandate to parent the child to become the best possible human being. This will often be difficult and frustrating. Children will not always be under control- certainly, not always under your control (if you have control issues, you sort of made a career error in having children!). When that happens, the stress of the moment may make you forget the love that ironically initiated the circumstances in the first place! This is normal and human. Accept your humanity, knowing that the core love will not be tarnished or forgotten forever. The love is always there deep down (sometimes, deep deep deep deep down at the moment!). While parental love is (or should be) always and unconditional, "like" can be transitional and much more conditional. It is OK not to like your children sometimes. Some people experience their parents disliking AND rejecting them, or disliking AND shaming them, or disliking AND abusing them, or some other hurtful combination. Such people may project onto their children the pain they felt as children. Normally, this is not the case. Such vigilant parents would actually tend to error in the opposite direction by denying the dislike and overcompensating for assumed harm. Disliking behavior or naming the behavior as "bad" may bring up intense anxiety. As children they may have been taught that their behavior was their essence. If the behavior was bad so were they. However, good people can make bad mistakes. Good people can do bad things. Good parents can parent badly at times. Distinguish between the essence of the child and relationship (who/which you love unconditionally) and the behavior of the child (behavior, which you can dislike or even hate). When you realize and accept that it is permissible and even normal to get mad at your child, forget for a brief period that you love them, AND even actually dislike them for a while, then you will not be disabled by one of the more disturbing words that can come out of your child. In fact, you will be able to seize upon it as a great opportunity to teach how to be upset and angry with boundaries. And how to dislike and still be civilized.

"I HATE YOU! I DON'T WANT YOU TO BE MY MOMMY ANYMORE!"

Occasionally, a child will be so upset with his/her parent that he/she may snap, "I hate you! I don't want you to be my mommy (or daddy) anymore!" The parent's reaction is often of absolute devastation. How could my baby be so hurtful to me? What have I done? What can I do? The child is so hurtful because somehow he/she has learned (from modeling?) that hurting someone when he/she is upset or hurt him/herself is appropriate. Normally, the parent has



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nothing more than discipline the child, set a boundary, or somehow disappointed him/her . Fortunately, the parent can and should do a lot. In fact, this is a wonderful crisis (danger & opportunity). The danger is for the child to learn hurting others as a way to express his/her own upset. The opportunity is to teach the boundaries between having hurt and appropriate behavior... between self-expression with ownership and vindictive attack. What should the parent do? First of all, discipline (probably with a scolding or a timeout possibly)!

“You’re on timeout! You’re on timeout because you said you ‘hate’ me... because you were trying to hurt me on purpose. You took my love for you to use to hurt me... saying you didn’t want me to be your mommy (or daddy) anymore. You are NEVER allowed to hurt someone on purpose. Yes, you were... are mad. That’s ok. It’s hard to remember that you love me and that I love you when you’re mad. You don’t like me right now. But hurting someone when you are mad is NEVER ok. Yes, you were upset. That’s ok. But it’s NEVER ok to try to hurt someone just because you are hurting too. You can say you’re upset. You can say you’re angry. You can say what you wanted... are disappointed. But you can’t be mean on purpose. You see, later on when you’ve forgotten that you wanted the extra cookie... or another 15 minutes of TV, if you hurt me on purpose, or even by accident, the hurt will still be there for me. As much as you are ready to make up or move on, the hurt will still be with me after whatever it was doesn’t matter anymore. And, that’s not fair. That’s not right. And, if you do it over and over... hurt me over and over, then I will have trouble remembering that I love you, and won’t be able to like you. I’ll be hurt too much. Some people do that all the time. And when they do, they hurt the other person so much that soon the other person can’t be around them anymore. He/she will just hurt too much. If you learn that it’s ok... if you think it’s ok to hurt someone when you’re mad, you will make people stop wanting to be with you. Because I love you even though I am mad at you right now, I need to make sure you know it’s not ok. Even as I am mad, I will not try to hurt you on purpose like you tried to hurt me because you were mad. So, for trying to hurt me on purpose, you’re on time out because you can’t with people when you think you can be mean to them. You’re not on timeout for being upset. Not for being mad. But for being mean on purpose. Mommy or Daddy may accept and forgive you, but in the real world people will punish severely for this. Sit here and think about other ways you could have shown that you were upset and mad.”

NOW POSSIBLY YOU CAN UNDERSTAND YOUR CHILD

Now possibly you can actually understand your child. These issues (Knowing Yourself, Being a Model of Self-Love, Taking Care of Yourself...First!, Being Emotionally and Physically Available, Being able to Separate, Distinguishing Love & Like) need to be resolved or addressed before a parent can have enough clarity to actually understand his/her child’s needs, moods, physical states, emotional states, temperament, environments: physical, social, emotional, familial, peer, and school. Otherwise, unresolved intrapersonal and interpersonal issues will continue to obscure that understanding.

Until you have the strong foundation in your own self-esteem and understanding, you cannot



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really understand your child. In the book, “The Wizard of Oz,” before entering the Emerald City, Dorothy and all other visitors and residents had to put on deep green glasses. With the green glasses, everything that she and everyone saw looked green no matter what their actual colors were. It was a trick of the Wizard’s to make every think that the entire city was made of green emeralds. Often there is a trick of childhood stress (and perhaps even trauma) that causes a grown child- now a parent to see everything in a certain light or tone. You must work to remove those childhood lenses. Your comprehension, until then will be distorted by the filter of your own issues, or you will not be able to accept the information that is given to you. Your child may tell you in his/her behavior and serene security that he/she is fine with a change, but if your childhood filters from your own neglect are in place then you will project anxieties into him/her irregardless. Or, your child may cry out for more structure and discipline, but your childhood perspective of discipline being harsh, punitive, and dismissive will prevent you from receiving the message. And if you don’t understand your child your cannot give him/her the support (parenting) he/sh needs. And, if you do... you will. Understanding also frees you from some of your guilt. And, understanding allows you to also like your child so much more.

This part is the beginning of building self-esteem as well as the last part of your foundation to build self-esteem. This is the ground floor. **THIS IS ALSO WHERE PARENTS USUALLY BEGIN BUILDING, RATHER THAN WITH THE FOUNDATION.** Unfortunately, since they may have skipped the foundation, they cannot build it properly. Remember how uneven and rough the ground was before you dug down into your childhood and life experiences). Just as a great dinner doesn’t begin with jumping to the cooking but begins with great preparation, great parenting begins with becoming a great (happy, secure, stable...) individual- YOU!

Now that the FOUNDATION for Self-Esteem has been established (or understood), next comes the BUILDING: Seven guidelines to Building Self-Esteem in Children.



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Chapter 32

I KNOW I'M NOT A BABY! BUT CAN'T I STILL HURT!?

Skipping... running... jumping... whee! Fun...fun...whee! Skipping... running... jumping... What if I put my foot there? And, my other foot, there? And, then, swing my arms like... like this? Or...or... like that? And wiggle my bottom like that? Hee hee hee! Cool! Look at me! Look at me! What? Don't what? I'll what? Oh... oh...OH... OH...OH OH! Ahhhh! Help... Help! BOOM!! OW! OW!

-Stop it! Stop crying! That's what you get for climbing on that. Stop it! Stop crying! You're not a baby anymore!

But it hurts! OW! But...

-Stop it! You're not a baby! Don't be a crybaby!

But... but... it hurts! I know I'm not a baby, but... can't I still hurt!

GUIDELINES TO BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN YOUR CHILD

In the previous articles, we discussed at length at setting the foundation for building the Self-Esteem of your child- building your own emotional, psychological, and physical health. If that foundation has been set, you can now build the "house." You've done the hard part already. In real life, the foundation is **your** own self-esteem; it is something you should always be working on. That is the great challenge of life; the process of continual growth. It is also the great joy of life- to feel oneself constantly becoming more and more able and healthy. Unfortunately, many people who have had major traumas and stresses in their younger lives, suffer damage to their own self worth. Instead of addressing their own issues, they often compensate by seeking to build and rescue their child's self-esteem- to give to them the support and nurturing that was not given to them. They may be become disabled by their own issues to the point, that they helping their children becomes so much harder.

A mother (let's call her "Jean") who as a child suffered emotional and physical abuse from her parents, had sworn never to allow that to happen to her children. Her very feisty and very normal 2-year-old twins could be challenging at times. Despite their somewhat rambunctious energy, they responded very well to clear boundaries and discipline. Yet, constantly she doubted herself whether she was disciplining them properly, and most importantly, whether they were being harmed- even traumatized by her discipline. I focused her on the lively joyous energy of the girls; they looked anything but traumatized! They were the happiest kids around! What was she worried about? Not really about the girls, but worried that "little Jean" would be betrayed again, and this time by "big Jean." Only when she was able to recognize that the little girl she was who was abused by the parents she had, was not the two little girls she now had... that the desperation and



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abandonment she felt, was not the experience of her two little girls, could she focus on giving the loving boundaries and discipline the girls needed for their energy to stay appropriate individually and socially.

On the other hand, you have all seen (perhaps, been) the parent in the vignette at the beginning of this article. Often such a parent has suffered very similar abuse as “Jean.” However, his/her response may be different. He/she may find the child’s distress far too familiar just like “Jean,” but instead of trying to rescue or protect the child from the distress, would want the child to ignore or deny the distress- not for the child’s well being, but so the adult won’t fall into distress. Often a child’s distress brings an adult back to the despair and hopelessness, he/she had experienced as a child when his/her parent was hurtful or neglectful. Feeling with (having empathy with) his/her own child drags the adult back into his/her abyss of despair so powerfully, that the urge to shut off the despair surges forward, even at the cost of denying his/her own child’s distress- “Stop it!” This is quite dangerous as it fundamentally denies the child his/her emotions... denies him/her the reality being experienced.

If you have stabilized own emotional and psychological health, then you can start (if it isn’t you **still** must start! Just be sure to work on yourself simultaneously). First, you must build the framework of the “house”... of Self-Esteem. Everything to follow in the structure goes on the framework of validation.

1) VALIDATE YOUR CHILD- This is difficult to do this without understanding him/her. That was why it was so important to clear out your prejudices, distortions, ghosts, and other issues that confuse and obscure how you see and understand him/her. How can you validate your child- meet his/her needs if you do not really know what is happening to and inside him/her? Being sensitive to his/her needs is not the same as assuming he/she has the identical needs that YOU had when you were young; that would be projecting your sensitivity onto your child whether or not it applies (remember Jean taking care of “little Jean” instead of her own children?). Support your child when he/she has fears, insecurities, and doubts; this is not the same as supporting his/her fears, insecurities, and doubts. You are supporting the child when he/she has these anxious feeling. You can still address the logic of the fears (or the illogic)... still set boundaries about how to behave or not behave, but most importantly do not emotionally abandon the child while he/she is in distress.

Acknowledge the difficulty of the feeling and validate it must be hard to feel it. "You feel scared, huh?", "I understand... it's hard isn't it?", "It doesn't feel good does it?" "You must feel really rotten." Do not minimize or try to undo the bad feelings by explaining why he/she doesn't need to feel scared, or why there "really" isn't any danger, or telling him/her that they are or will be OK (this can be taken as they should be OK). Doing this invalidates the child just as much as calling him/her a "baby", or "silly", "stupid", and so forth. When we try to explain away the child's bad feelings, it doesn't work. In addition, we get frustrated at the child's lack of reason (but that's how children think!) We also get frustrated at the lack of reception we are getting from him/her...the imagined **lack of respect, deference, and listening**. This often has the effect



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of provoking **our** internal sense of inadequacy, impotency, insecurity, and ignorance. This can be quite frightening, especially since we have been trying to avoid these feelings... possibly, for years. This is where we tend to ask these loaded questions: Beware of trying or how you try to get explanations from your child for his/her behavior. Many statements or questions have both a surface and an implied underlying component. Be careful that the underlying component is not a dangerous accusation. For example, the simple question, "Why?" can easily have an underlying question of "What's wrong with you?" That underlying question is actually an accusation that "Something IS wrong with you!" (In a previous article, V.1.3, The Most Dangerous Question a Parent can ask the Child "Why did you do that?", I discussed this common and seemingly innocent question more extensively). Another dangerous implicit message underlying "Why?" or "How come you're scared?" or some other request for explanation, is that you must come up with a logical answer, or else you don't have the right to your feelings. In other words, you must justify yourself in order to have the feelings. Not surprisingly, this harmful communication comes up often with couples in therapy that I've conducted.

EXPLORATION & EXPERIMENTATION; STUDY & PRACTICE

Remember, let your child be a child. And, a child will mess up; in fact, will mess up and actually needs to mess up A LOT! The primary process of learning according to cognitive developmental theorist Piaget comes from exploration and experimentation, and that means having some explorations and experiments blow up in your face! The Chinese calligraphy for "learning" is two words written together to indicate the interplay between them creating the meaning: study and practice. While practice doesn't always make perfect (actually, practice makes for lots of mistakes while hopefully, moving towards greater proficiency), it is critical normally for learning. Study, including study of one's mistakes works in conjunction with practice to facilitate learning. A child needs to be allowed to mess up without being labeled or made to feel like a mess up. A mess up is hopeless; messing up is curable or transitory. Children need to understand this in order to learn and grow. Their adults need to understand this in order to validate children in their process.

When your child is in distress because of some "tragedy" or mistake, connect emotionally first. Validate the child in his/her distress. You can do this if you are emotionally available (because having taken care of your emotional/psychological health as part of the foundation to building Self-Esteem we discussed in earlier articles). The words you say are less important than whether you use touch, the tone of your voice, your facial expression, and body language to convey your concern and caring- NOT your problem solving skills (yet). Be sure that your child gets your concern and caring is genuine. Then, you can lead the child to his/her strength or his/her security in your strength and proceed with problem solving.

Continuing the metaphor of building the house, after the foundation (you) and with the framework established (validating your child), now you can add the first of many key elements to the structure.

2) TEACH RESPONSIBILITY WITHOUT SHAME, BLAME, & FAULT- Responsibility is



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about power and control. Respond + Ability = Responsibility. Children and adults, both need to learn how to take responsibility in their lives. Unfortunately, instead of responsibility, many people are taught instead that they should have shame, guilt, and feel at fault. Responsibility is positive. Shame, guilt, and fault, however, are about one's rotten inner essence. Our society often likes to blame. Many people, including people in positions of authority are not willing to take responsibility for the ills in our society. We confuse blame with responsibility. While we all assert and preach that everyone must take responsibility; one cannot take blame- it means one is a rotten person. Many adults have used the word, "responsibility" incorrectly and have contaminated it for others including their children. When does someone tend to talk to you about your responsibility? The problem is, normally when you haven't been responsible AND are about to get in trouble for it. "That was **your** responsibility!" is virtually always spat out as a damning accusation. Avoid blaming and shaming when interacting with or disciplining your child. You can do this better as you better deal with your own shame and guilt issues. It is hard to avoid blaming and shaming if you still blame yourself, feel guilty, or feel the need to be forgiven. Show/model responsibility and give/expect responsibility. Look for the process of responsibility and not the product of responsibility; looking at the product leads to failure and the blaming and shaming that come with failure.

SPLIT MILK THAT LEAVES NO STAINS

Your child runs into the room (he/she has been told not to run inside before), slips and runs into the table and causes the glass of milk to spill onto the table and onto the rug below. If he/she is to blame, at fault, and guilty of this horrendous act, then even if he/she picks up the glass, cleans it, refills it with milk, wipes the table dry, and cleans the rug so that there is no stain, a stain remains on him/her. The stain upon his/her character... upon his/her worth remains no matter how much care he/she takes not only in making amends for the mistake, but in ensuring that he/she does not make the mistake again. It won't matter. Many adults carry such stains from mistakes that their parents shamed and blamed them for as children. However, if the child was not blamed or shamed, but held responsible such enduring damage can be avoided. The child is held responsible for running in the house (you can allow a child to be a child, but that doesn't mean that you still don't teach responsibility), remains responsible for drying the table, cleaning and then refilling the glass with milk, and continuing so no stain stays on the rug. And, because he/she was held responsible and not shamed and blamed, there never was a stain upon his/her soul. AND, he/she continues to be responsible by taking care to prevent repetition of such a mistake.

You can create and direct opportunities for the child to have control and power, to be responsible, to solve problems, to choose without blame or guilt. When he/she does positive things, reflect back to him/her the good choices and the responsible behavior that he/she executed. When he/she makes mistakes, help him/her take responsibility by finding out how to problem solve the mistakes and make amends for the harm they may have caused, **FIRST!** Then, reflect back to him/her the poor choices and irresponsible behavior that he/she executed. The reason to focus on the problem solving first (after validating the distress) is to focus the child on affirmative processes- his/her power and control in the situation despite negative issues. The child is already feeling bad about



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messing up... already in distress, and would experience the “responsibility speech” as insensitivity or being punished... salt added to the wound. Part of the core of the distress is of having made a mistake and having no power or control over making it, nor of fixing it. As you validate the distress of messing up (and inner fear of being a “mess up”), you cannot help him/her undo the mistake, but can help your child address the distress of losing power and control by giving guidance and support to either fix it or make amends for it. How can you do this? You can do this if you are not overly drawn to or sensationalized by the mistake (the behavior) itself. How do you do this? You can do this if you can distinguish your love of your child from liking or not liking his/her behavior (part of the foundation to building Self-Esteem we discussed in earlier articles). The mistake or the behavior was not done “at” you... not done purposely “to” you. Of course, you don’t like it; you’re not supposed to like negative, hurtful, or disruptive behavior- purposeful or accidental. That why you teach... discipline... parent a child to recognize what should be done instead, what can be done now, what the poor choices were, and what better choices would be. And, why do you bother? Because you love your child. However, love is not enough. Work, introspection, health, growth, and... responsibility! are vital too.

Have you learned your responsibility as a parent? Or, do you feel blamed, shamed, and guilty? Can you make the distinction? I and others can honor... however you, above all must honor **your** distress at the mistakes you’ve committed. Also honor **your** distress over the feelings of powerlessness and loss of control. And, remind **yourself** of your continued responsibility- ability to respond with better choices and regain appropriate power and control as a good parent. AND, challenge **yourself** to look at your mistakes to take responsibility for them and to learn from them.



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Chapter 33

NO!! (YOU DON'T HAVE THE RIGHT!)

*She's a fierce one, that Hilary. Always pushing it. Always gotta touch what you tell her not to touch. Hotheaded Hilary! The-touch-everything girl. I got my hands full with the dishes. What's she up to now? "Hey... Hey... Don't touch that!" She's pausing... she's looking at me... there's that little smile... no, no... she heard me... she knows I don't want her to touch it... that's why she's smiling! How evil!! "Hil-LAR-REE! Stop it!!" She's looking dead at me... smiling... moving her hand, slowly toward it. She's having fun messing with me! "HILARY, I said don't touch that! I know that you understand me... I know... hey, hey, HEY! I said... I said..." She touched it! She TOUCHED IT!! I KNEW she would touch it. Aaargh! Darn it! And, she's still looking me square in the eyes with that smug smirk on her face. She's enjoying this. She's messing with me! Well, I'LL SHOW HER!! I'LL SHOW HER WHO'S BOSS!! I'LL SHOW HER!! "YOU'RE ON TIME OUT! COME HERE! DON'T YOU RUN AWAY FROM ME! GOTCHA!!" Darn kid! Grab her tight around by the arms... sit her down on the bench! Sit her down with firmness... sit her down with anger... sit her down out of control... sit her down and hurt her with my grip on her arms and the force of her bottom on the bench... **With fire in her eyes, Hilary looks up and snarls, "NO! Stop it!"***

YOU DON'T HAVE THE RIGHT

This happens between an adult (perhaps, the parent) and a challenging child. It is not something an adult may be proud of. In frustration with her continued testing and acting out, the adult lost patience and forgot... lost the person he/she swore he/she would always be with young children. Hilary did not get seriously or even mildly hurt; she suffered no injury or bruise. But it did not matter. The adult was too rough with her. An adult who was three to seven/eight times a big as a small (admitted fierce) child betrayed the responsibility of the caretaker to the developing youngster. It is up to the individual and his/her real and ideal self to reconcile the mistake. When Hilary snarled, "NO! Stop it!" The adult (hopefully) was immediately stricken with guilt for what he/she had done. And, filled with shame... a fundamental betrayal of who to be for and with children. The adult needs to take immediate responsibility for what he/she had done, how it had gotten to that point; and, continue to take responsibility to make sure that it would never (if at all possible)- violate a child like this again. As stated in a previous article, responsibility is about learning from your mistakes as a parent (because you will make plenty!). Also, in an earlier article (V.1.2 Feedback, Frustration, and Self-Esteem- "You guys better be quiet! Or... Or...!!"), I maintained that making a mistake does not destroy children. It is when mistakes happen over and over in a pattern of behavior and interaction that they becoming damaging. If the overall pattern is of attention, nurturing, and appropriate discipline, then children can tolerate a parental mistake occasionally. The mistake becomes an opportunity for the adult to learn about him/herself and the greater complexity of the care-taking dynamic. (By the way, if you are still horrified at what the adult did... that is, be human, and you still chose to condemn, there's not much I can say... about



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your self-righteous, moralistic, judgmental, and shallow insecurity that needs to put others down to boost your fragile ego! I could refer you to a number of therapists or ministers to work on this, but you wouldn't go anyway!)

When finished with an immediate quick process of shame and guilt to responsibility, the adult (hopefully) was struck by the implicit message... the powerful assertion of Hilary snarling, "NO! Stop it!" "You don't have the right!!" "You," in other words, "**no one has the right to hurt me!!**" I told you Hilary was fierce. Without a doubt, she had many issues in terms of her behavior and how she affected the community of the classroom and school, and her family dynamics that needed to be worked on. On the other hand, her self-determination that she had the right to not be hurt... to not be abused was something she already had... and asserted! After the seven adult fundamentals to the foundation of building Self-Esteem, come the first two guidelines to Building Self-Esteem in Children: Validate Your Child and Teach Responsibility without Shame, Blame, and Fault (discussed in the previous article, V.3.12 I Know I'm Not a Baby! But Can't I Still Hurt!?). Hilary despite her intense combative personality already had internalized the lessons of the next guideline—expressed in part A and part B.

3A) TEACH THAT NO ONE SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO ABUSE HIM/HER- (including you!) Far too often, parents and teachers teach children to not let anyone abuse them, yet harm them with verbal, emotional, and physical abuse (if not even, sexual abuse) within their own homes and classrooms. A common response for many adults challenged by a Hilary would be to be embarrassed and rather than take responsibility, hide the embarrassment with greater aggression and intimidation against the child. Children are extremely vulnerable to the adults that care for them. They can be mistreated, abused, ignored, neglected, and arbitrarily and unfairly treated out of the view of others. Or, if such treatment were observed, other adults who decide to "mind their own business" give often permission by silence. The more a person, people, or community is vulnerable to harm... the greater their dependence is on those they must trust, the greater the responsibility of the person, the people, or institutions that hold power over them. Children are such vulnerable people. As a society, we are not too far removed from a time when children were legally considered to be the property of their parents, to do with as they saw fit, as they would do with their other property. Remember that the first child abuse intervention in the United States had no legal status per se based on any mandate to protect children from harm, but was done by officials who had to turn to an existing animal abuse law for legal justification! There still exists in many communities and families that same assertion that a family retains the moral right to physically discipline a child, including to the extent that severe pain and injury may occur. Or, to emotionally or psychologically humiliate or terrorize a child to change behavior, or whenever the adult's mood turns violently.

To grow up in a family where you not only experience abuse but are expected to accept it, perhaps to deny that it is abuse, but call it "discipline" instead, is to learn that you both deserve it and are powerless to stop it. The bully/abuser always make it a point to blame the victim/abused for "deserving" the bullying/abuse (as was discussed in the previous discussions about the bully and



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victim dynamic). Someone who grows up in such a family becomes very likely to enter into and stay in relationships where they will allow their intimate partners to abuse them. They replicate the pattern of helplessness and abuse from childhood into adult relationships. Parents do not normally choose to abuse their children, nor intend to duplicate their own childhood trauma, or train them to enter into future dysfunctional relationships. However, in the frustration of their lives, especially when they have experiences with abuse and trauma in their lives (in particular, as children), adults can slip past the boundaries between strict and fair discipline set by caring parents, and arbitrary punitive violations committed by rageful out of control parents.

Adults, to be positive caregivers must acknowledge and admit their own errors. They must understand their own dynamics: what makes them frustrated, what are their needs, their issues with power and control, and so forth. They need to get out of their Twilight Zones so they can be emotionally and psychologically present for their children. Only if they can do this, can they empower their children to assert their right to be free from abuse—even from them! Practically speaking it can be very difficult... even impossible for most children to challenge their parents or teachers. On the other hand, some children and parents get out of control and the challenging becomes defiant and disrespectful; youthful passion and desires devolve into selfish and self-righteous entitlement. This makes it even more incumbent on the adults to be firm and fair, but also sensitive and nurturing in their discipline. It is important to find ways for your child to assert themselves even against your best judgments at times. Perhaps, that may mean letting them win some of the “smaller” battles or disagreements. Parents become over-controlling when all the battles are perceived as “big” and important to win. Children who don’t experience “winning” in the family become more prone to either rebel eventually, or accept domination and exploitation later. Let them tell you when you are wrong when you are wrong. Ya know, that does happen! Can your ego handle that? Some will read this and feel it implies that children be given permission to disrespect their parents and other adults. Obedience is not the same as respect. Silence is not the same as respect. Hopefully, readers will see this as a call for adults to respect children.

3B) TEACH THEM TO ALWAYS TAKE CARE OF HIM/HERSELF- “Always” is an unequivocal word—a powerful mandate. Co-dependent personalities are far from “always” caring for themselves. Such people always give up themselves in order to “buy” other people’s affection or cooperation. Or, to gain power (often, only an illusion of power). The co-dependent personality seeks his/her own happiness by denying his/her own needs (falsely, in a form of self-deception) in order to incur a reciprocal obligation by his/her target. This is not a true selflessness, but an admission of inability to control one’s own happiness directly. Unable to fulfill him/herself, the co-dependent manipulates the target who then “owes” the co-dependent. The target must then take care of him/her. Children need to learn how to always take care of themselves. Learn to ask them to take care of themselves. Teach themselves to ask themselves: “Is this good for me? Or, bad for me?” “I want this now, but how will I feel later?” “Is this healthy?” “Are the consequences to me and others going to be good?” “How will this be for me now and later?” and other questions that prompt them to care for themselves. Even as you set limits and make decisions for them, be clear how the limits and decision serve them. From this “selfishness,” they can then learn how their



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needs can be met through, or can be compatible with meeting the needs of family, partners, peers, and community. Sometimes it is appropriate to give up your needs in order to balance the needs of the group (family, peer group, classroom, workplace, etc.). While this may sound contradictory to the mandate of “always” taking care of yourself, taking care of the group dynamic and social harmony is about taking care of yourself. Alienating the group and then being ostracized or rejected (sent into the wilderness, fired, divorced, and so forth) is not a good way to take care of yourself! Balancing individual needs and group needs involves a complexity that these principles can offer guidance for, but cannot be a specific blueprint for.

On the other hand, you certainly cannot possibly teach children to take care of themselves if your model is your sacrificing yourself continually for them! Do you let others (partners, family, bosses, colleagues, peers, authorities, children) abuse YOU? Do you take care of yourself FIRST? Have you integrated being the good caregiver with healthy selfishness? Are you a model of self-love (sometimes, eating the last cookie... or buying the kind of cookies you like!)? As you nurture yourself, you can more readily and honestly be selfless with them. You model how never allow others to abuse you, and how to take care of yourself first within a community context.



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Chapter 34

YOU CAN DO IT VS. YOU BETTER DO IT!

This one... this one goes here. Hmm... good. And this one goes... uh? here? no... here?
Humph! Grrrr! It goes HERE!! This way... that way... Aaargh!

Keep trying, honey. You can do it.

*This way? No, that way? Hmm... Got it! Yes!! And this one goes... where? here? Umph!
No... maybe... Grrrr! Where does it go? Aaargh! "I can't do it!"*

You can do it. Try turning it again. See where the blue is?

*Hmmm? Blue? Blue here too... turn... Good! Got it!! I know where this one goes. It goes...
here! NOT! Grrrr! Humph! "I hate this puzzle!" SMACK!!*

No, honey. I know it's hard, but it's not OK to hit the puzzle. You can do it. Try this piece. See the big round part? Can you find a hole that it fits? I know you can do it.

*Hmmm? Big round part... big round hole? Maybe... here? Here? Yes! And, this one... here.
And, this one... ahh... here! And, this the last one... ummm... here!! I CAN do it!!*

Yes! You DID do it! I knew you could! Hip hip hooray for honey!

THE "BEST" IS TRANSCENDED

All parents want the best for their children. How they "encourage" and "support" them varies to a great deal and is often dependent on what they perceive is the "best" or, conversely the "worse" for their children. What is the "best" for your child? Each parent's definition of what is the best comes from his/her own life experiences, challenges, difficulties, and even their trauma and pain. For some, the "worse" is for their children to re-live the same pain they had endured as children. In the generation who grew up in the Great Depression, the "best" was defined by the need to compensate for the suffering created by the economic hardships of the times. Breadlines, assaults to one's dignity, financial desperation... fear, dominated the children's lives. As adults and as parents who suffered, the "best" may mean financial security. Emotional and psychological health and nurturing were overshadowed by the stress of basic survival uncertainties. The stress ignited painful and destructive emotional and psychological experiences. A perception of their parents "failure" (although, there had been no failure on their part, rather their being victimized by political and economic circumstances beyond their control) may drive such a parent to define the "best" in terms of anything that promotes financial acquisition and retention.



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For a person who grew up in an emotionally barren home, the “best” may mean the unconditional emotional availability of one’s parents. I am always reminded of the client who had emotionally unavailable parents, on an overnight visit to her little girlfriend’s house. She recalled watching with envy and longing, her friend’s mother gently tucking her friend into bed, saying goodnight, and then giving her a gentle goodnight kiss on the cheek. And then being thrilled beyond words, when her friend’s mother came to her bed to tuck her in as well, wish her a good night, and give HER a gentle peck on her cheek- a simple act of affection that shone in contrast like a diamond amidst the coals of her desolate family experience. Twenty-five years later, this moment of caring still rang powerful and nostalgically in this woman’s life. For her, the “best” for her children was driven by her need to compensate for the emotional desert she endured as a child.

As a son of a Chinese immigrant family, the “best” as perceived and promoted by my parents had much to do with their experiences growing up in China culturally in a Confucian feudal society, during a period of political and economic turmoil and of ongoing warfare (late 1920’s and early 1930’s through the late 1940’s). On the other hand, my formative years were the 1960’s of socially activist Berkeley! Talk about a contrasting definition of the “best” as promoted by the progressive-radical idealism of those times! Reconciling their perceptions and teachings with my reality (Berserkeley, as it was often sarcastically referenced) became a major challenge of my childhood. For the children of the child (now adult) of the Depression, their conflict would be between their parent’s Depression (deprivation-defined) values and their current reality based upon their actual lifestyle, which often can be relatively financially secure and comfortable (normally and ironically, from the driven work ethic from fear and anxiety of their parents). Their definition of what is the “best” may evolve from and beyond the financial security they already have, while simultaneously being stuck in the financial insecurity that traumatized their parents. For the woman who’s kiss from her friend’s mother was so precious and sweet, her adamant nurturing of her children would probably give them an emotional security from which they can grow from. By gifting her children with this “best,” her children can transcend it (and not hunger for it as she did)- if she did not smother them. Compulsive loving, giving, and nurturing from this personal historical insecurity however, can cause problems too (for example, result in a failure to set appropriate boundaries and consequences for children). With a healthy integration of this parental love though, such children will have the emotional security to seek and define their “best” from it. They probably can risk emotional disconnection and abandonment in seeking other, additional, and higher forms of self-actualization more readily than their mother, from having a stronger core of self-worth from the unconditional love. They would have transcended their mother’s needs (in a very positive manner).

This is another reminder to not “give grandmother roller-skates!” In other words, what is desperately precious to you may not be precious in the same way to your children. Parents usually compensate for what they wanted but did not receive as children, by OVER-compensating in giving that to their children. And, as a result, eliminating any deprivation based longing for that. This is not to say that giving or promoting financial security, or love, or culture is not appropriate or loving, but that intense urgency does not have to move into the next



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generation. When parents are clear in their own process (including their traumas and neuroses!), they progress so they can more readily follow through on the fourth guideline on building Self-Esteem in their children.

4) CHALLENGE / NOT PUSH; HAVE EXPECTATIONS / NOT DEMANDS- Parents sometimes push their children with demands that can be extremely stressful and sometimes individually and/or developmentally completely inappropriate. This happens when they develop rigid standards of behavior that have little or nothing to do with their children's actual needs or personality, but that have somehow been raised to a high (often moralistic) level through either personal experiences or the promotion of some authoritative "expert." The previous paragraphs give some examples of such personal experiences. The experts may be an author, a teacher, a minister, some political figure, in a book, from a magazine, on TV, and/or the movies. While many such people and sources often give excellent information, they are speaking to generalities and principles about "many" children, "most" children, or "a significant portion" of children. Many of these principles and concepts are excellent and soundly based (some are incredibly off the wall, judgmental and moralistic, or archaic!). However, even the soundest theories need to be examined for specific applicability to your specific, individual, unique, one-of-a-kind child! And, even if a theory is applicable to you precious one-and-only, how specifically and variably is it expressed in your child... and when? And for how long? Under what circumstances? Here we go with the children are complicated and thus parenting is complicated routine! Well, if they weren't complicated and parenting complicated, then maybe they wouldn't be children, but inert lumps of clay you can mold instead!

Base your expectations of behavior on child-centered appropriateness based on research and study, instead of adult-generated standards, adult-generated fear of failure, or your reaction to your own oppression as a child. Individualize all your and society's stuff to your unique being of a child. Accept him/her as unique and special and treat him/her so--- individualize! Challenging and having expectations of a child differs from pushing and making demands of him/her in the respect for his/her uniqueness. To challenge someone, you need to find the edge of his/her comfort zone and discomfort zone. To challenge someone, you need to find the extreme edge of competence where secure competence moves into uncertainty about one's ability. When you push someone, you push not matter where they are. You are pushing them towards what may be highly uncomfortable or even what might be highly dangerous. You may be pushing them well beyond their capacity and competence. Such pushing pushes them into failure. Growth and learning happen at the edge of discomfort—not in the secure comfort zone, but also not in the zone of radically unfamiliar or foreign territory. The simple, familiar, and secure offer no challenge or growth opportunities (is even boring!) and the over-demanding prompts feelings of incompetence and creates overwhelming anxiety. Challenging differs from pushing in that the challenge to go beyond where one is, while pushing is force one to a specific spot no matter how dangerous it is and no matter how unprepared one is.



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Expectations, especially expectations to try, to be engaged, to struggle imply encouraging children to be in a process of growth. Demands define the goals explicitly and punish one for not reaching them. Demands are achievement oriented while expectations are developmentally oriented. How is a parent to distinguish between challenging and pushing? Between expectation and demands? To challenge and have expectations, you need to be aware of and respectful of your child's individuality, developmental stages, and personality. You need to know your child... as completely as possible. Then, you can nudge, encourage, or bring them to their edge of discomfort to conquer new horizons and grow. And, be able to give them the appropriate support to handle the slight (not overwhelming) discomfort.

YEA DADDY!

Do you push your child to read? Or, do you challenge him/her to explore words, stories, and books? Do you demand performance to your standards? Or, do you expect your child to try... to have values... to consider new things? And, do you do all that whether or not he/she is engaged, in distress, joyful, or anxious? Do you provide the support his/her personality and aptitudes need? Or, do you provide what Dr. BigShotChildlessExpert says ALL children need? And, most importantly, do you model and live challenge and expectations in your life? Many parents push (uh... or "support") their children because of what they had not done or achieved in their own lives. They push their children to reach their potential because of their remorse and shame from not having reached their own potential. Sometimes parents act as if their opportunity to grow and excel has passed... that their responsibility to stretch is over or complete... that with their personal failure, they are then obligated to give up on personal growth and give 100% (or 150%!) to promoting their children's growth and success. At least, the next generation will "make it". Unfortunately, as much as they are invested in their children, they compromise their support by presenting a live model of stagnation and surrender. Several years ago, after four difficult years balancing a business, other work, and family with a Masters of Psychology program, I completed the degree, my first step towards a career change from education and child development to becoming a therapist. My wife and I decided to celebrate the milestone with a nice dinner with the family- our two little girls and us. When I told Trisha who was 7 years old at the time about going out, she asked me why. She had been three and her younger sister not quite one when I had begun the degree program. I told her,

"Remember, when you finished Kindergarten? You had learned a lot of things and worked really hard for ten months, and then you and your friends had finally finished Kindergarten. Remember how special that was? And, then everyone got together to have a special celebration because finishing Kindergarten is really great. Well, you know I've been going to a school for a long time too... four years... it was a lot of work and hard too. You remember me staying up late and studying? And being sleepy and tired? And, going to classes sometimes at night and on Saturdays? Well, I finished! And, now I'm a Masters program graduate... kinda like you were a Kindergarten graduate. I finished too, and we're going to dinner to have a family celebration for that!"



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I'll always remember with great fondness as Trisha's expression transformed from curiosity to understanding, and a twinkle appeared in her eyes and big smile spread across her face, and she shouted out sweetly with a pump of her little fist, "Yea daddy!" As she grew over the years (presently, deciding on which college to attend) and we tried to challenge (not push) and have expectations (not demands) of her, it was not "challenge yourself although your dad didn't challenge himself... take these current expectations of ours to see if they can be yours too, even though dad was scared to have expectations." Daddy is not a hypocrite! Much more importantly (significantly, more important than any achievement per se of mine), she had a visible living model of challenge and struggle in daddy. "Go for it? Take a chance? Struggle for what you want? Do something hard? Stretch? **Sure!** Might be rough, but **Daddy** did it before, **I** must be able to do it too! It was hard for him, but he still did it. It may be hard for me, but **I can still try**... and maybe (probably?) do it too! I'm a can-do kid!" (Mommy has been quite a model of growth and courage too, by the way!) Both of our daughters are willing to be challenged and try to meet expectations. For this, we are happy. Better than that, is that as teenagers, they are willing to challenge themselves and have expectations of themselves.



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Chapter 35

YOU'RE THE BEST... REALLY, YOU'RE THE BEST... REALLY...

You're the best. You have so much ability.

Thanks, Mom. Thanks.

Look how well you did in the last show. Your timing... how you remembered all your lines...

Thanks, Mom. Thanks.

The other parents noticed too... really, you're the best...

OK, Mom. Thanks.

I hope you realize how special you are... really...

Yeah yeah, Mom. Thanks.

You keep it up. I'm so proud of you. You're the best.

Uh... Thanks, Mom. Give it a rest. Thanks, already.

There's nothing you can't do. So smart... so talented...

Hmmm? How come she keeps on? Does she REALLY believe it?

Maybe she doesn't think I believe it! Or, SHOULD believe it!

There are times when parents and adults just overdo it with praise. They praise and praise and praise trying to build the Self-Esteem of children. However, as they praise they can also convey doubt... doubt that the children actually are worthy of the praise, and/or doubt that the children really believe it. In a previous article (V.1.4, Significance Meets Socialization & Frustration), I wrote about how when the people that are significant to you, find you to be significant as well build your Self-Esteem. Praise comes from this principle. However, just as there was more to building Self-Esteem than just significance, there is more to significance than just praising children. Frequent and undifferentiated praise can have an unexpected debilitating effect. Effusive praise can have the unfortunate effect of making people dependent upon the approval of others. If a child or a person becomes accustomed to... becomes dependent upon praise to motivate him/her to give honest effort, to have high standards of performance, and to achieve competency, then what may result is an individual who will not remain conscientious **if there is no one there to praise, to acknowledge, or to reward him/her**. Successful people have expectations (a strong ideal self) and seek personal effort, performance, and skills whether or not there is anyone else present to note it. Most of us can enjoy praise, but being dependent on it is dangerous.

HIDING THE "INNER FRAUD"

On the other hand, we recognize the danger of not praising children. However, to what degree should we praise? I can recall many a parent or teacher praising a child, repeating over and over how great he/she was or is. The child took the initial praise with some slight embarrassment. As the adult continued, the child became more and more uncomfortable. Some adults tell a child how much potential he/she has because he/she was not meeting it- a backhanded way to criticize in the guise of support. It is not unusual for a child to be uncomfortable with praise for another



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reason. In fact, many adults have a fear that their “Inner Fraud” would be exposed. They fear they will be exposed as a fraud... that they do not deserve the praise and even adulation that they receive... and worse yet, that they have actually **fooled** everyone into thinking that they are competent, talented, and deserving. How do people universally acclaimed by appreciative and knowledgeable peers, friends, and family become consumed with such anxiety despite their great skills and outstanding performances? The Inner Fraud develops when a person gets praise from significant people, not to acknowledge competency or performance but as demands for competency and performance that is often outside the comfort zone... the normal range of functional and developmental ability of the individual. Along with such praise/demands is an implicit “or else” message, that failure to show competency or performance indicates one's inherent unworthiness. Terrified to expose such unworthiness to those he/she finds significant, the individual struggles mightily (often denying emotional and psychological health and developmental needs) to deliver... to meet the praise/demand. However, even as he/she is successful, the individual cannot celebrate the accomplishment in as far as he/she feels success has been achieved by the skin of his/her teeth or luck or deception. Any satisfaction in his/her achievement lacks depth or meaning, and is transitory. And, he/she fears that he/she will be exposed as a fraud any second. Worse yet, now others will expect it of him/her again! Since there is a danger of creating an “Inner Fraud” through demanding praise, the next guideline to building Self-Esteem in children is to be able to

5) PRAISE APPROPRIATELY- Is your praise really a demand for performance in disguise? Is it a nice (but insidiously sneaky and destructive) way to express disappointment? Is it sincere praise? False praise rings hollow to even little children. Praise for lousy effort is insincere and at it's worse, reinforces the lousy effort. There are people who are sparse with praise who never or rarely acknowledge others effort, competency, achievements, or performances. There might be family models or cultural factors that limit or preclude praising children. In totalitarian societies, self-esteem, which is promoted by praise, is actually avoided, since it makes one stand out to be possibly harmed by those in power. However, in our democratic society, this cultural factor is not as relevant. Those who have suffered the lack of praise from parents often resolve to not to replicate such behavior, and easily and frequently praise their own children. However, some adults praise effusively and dishonestly for lackadaisical or careless effort. I have often seen children scribble onto a piece of paper with disinterest and minimal effort, then present it to a well-intended adult who then praises it as a work of art! The adult reinforces that mediocre effort and marginal investment will be accepted in the real world to come (elementary and high schools, college, and the adult vocational world). This flawed approach is based upon an assumption that a child will be devastated if he/she is not positively reinforced... that his/her self-esteem is so fragile that it must be supported with false praise... with lies.

IN THE REAL WORLD

As children move into the real world where no one loves them like their parents love them, they will expect treatment and expectations similar to what they had received from their parents. They will continue to expect praise for poor performance and low investment. To their surprise, others



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such as teachers, coaches, peers, supervisors, bosses, boyfriends & girlfriends, and spouses will reject rather than accept minimal and marginal effort and performance. They will be devastated (in being rejected), disabled (by having not acquired the skills or work ethics), and/or angered (from their sense of entitlement) as others care little or not at all about supporting their self-esteem; and care entirely about their performance or contribution on the job, in the classroom, or in the relationship. False praise can build up a false self that the child is aware of as being false, or accepts as legitimate although others reject it. Praise the process and validate the energy, if the process and energy deserve it. How do you do that? **You must know the child to be able to do this properly.** You must know what is developmentally appropriate for your child at his/her given age... and what is his/her individual capacity- his locus of proximal development (as was discussed in the previous article). How should you respond? What would be your goal? Is it just to criticize the child? Of course, not. **The goal of parental/adult praise should be to teach the child how to self-praise.** Consider responding in a different manner when a child presents performance that is clearly beneath his/her capacity (versus not meeting your standards!)... a drawing for example.

DO YOU LIKE IT?

The child asks, "Do you like it?" Children often have learned early how to fish for praise from adults. Many supportive adults may respond with the lie, "Oh, I really like it! It's so pretty. You did such a good job." Poor work becomes supported. Expectations of poor work being acceptable are created. The adult may instead respond by asking the child, "Hmmm... Do YOU like it?" If the child is sincerely self-evaluative, he/she may respond, "Well, I don't really like it," or "It's OK." Then the adult can prompt, "Well, there's some parts that are nice. Over here... and over here. I think you did a good job there. What do you think?" The adult is not only pointing out what is worthy of praise but also prompting the child to be self-evaluative. The adult can then add, "I think there are some parts that you can make better. Do you see them?" While there is an acceptance of the quality that exists, the adult also prompts the child to see where he/she can improve the quality of his/her work. If the child does see these areas and then is willing to work on them, he/she should be praised for the self-evaluation and the conscientiousness of wanting to improve. If the child has difficulty seeing these areas, the adult should point them out. If the child is hesitant to improve these areas, the adult should give honest feedback that the quality remains marginal without improvement. Depending on the circumstances, the adult may even sternly require the child to do additional work on it. Once the child has put the additional effort and work into his/her project, then the adult should prompt the child to praise him/herself, "What do you think now? How do you like how it looks now?" Hopefully, the child will be able to self-acknowledge and say, "I like it better now." Then the adult can respond with integrity, "I like it too! Good job." In other words, the adult should then praise BOTH the higher quality of the project and the child's additional energy in improving the project (that is, if the additional effort was sincere as opposed to cursory... again). "Aren't you glad you worked on it some more? I think it was worth it, don't you think? Tell yourself, 'good job!'"



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Are you criticizing the child, or perhaps teaching him/her to criticize him/herself? Criticism in of itself does not have to be negative or harmful- it is the critiquing of performance or effort... it is not necessarily a **judgment** of the quality or inherent worth of the individual. It is when poor or mediocre performance is equated with an individual's poor or mediocre worth, or good performance is equated with an individual's high worth that criticism becomes dangerous. Criticism may be difficult to present in a nurturing manner if the adult is unaware or dismissive of the child's temperament and sensitivity. It is incredibly difficult to do well if the critic is not staying with the child's abilities. All criticism should include praise; validate effort and energy; be honest; be age and child appropriate. Criticism (perhaps, further defined as evaluation and feedback) should be toward extending the potential of the child- challenging at the edge of his/her potential, and not according to some outside standards. Socialization oriented criticism must be at the child's level of comprehension and relevant (that is, of a positive service) to his/her life. Self-criticism then serves the same positive purpose. And, self-criticism should then include self-praise for good effort, integrity, and performance as well. Many people however are comfortable about praising others but can only be negatively self-critical of themselves. They are unable to acknowledge their own achievements and positive qualities; they cannot self-praise.

BREAKING THE "RULE" OF FALSE HUMILITY

There is often a basic hypocrisy in our culture that on the one hand encourages the development of high self-esteem, and on the other hand, labels anyone who actually self-acknowledges (much less dares to verbalize) his/her own ability, a fathead! Sometimes in my workshop presentations including ones on developing self-esteem in children, I purposely provoke this contradiction in my audience by proclaiming that, "I am very good as a speaker. In fact, I am an excellent presenter!" While some participants laugh out loud, other might smile and nod in affirmation, but still others' mouths drop open in shock, thinking

"He broke the rule... you know... the RULE. The rule that says you must be humble... you must pretend that you don't have skills, abilities, or talents. You're supposed to be self-deprecating. Deflect any praise, deny any praise... not... not say you are good at something! Even though, you may have been working all your life to become good at it... even though, everyone else says you are good at it. Even though, I've been sitting in this room thinking, feeling that you ARE good at it... But, I'm supposed to say it... NOT you! And, then you're supposed to be humble and blush and... and... **You're supposed to build self-esteem in children... NOT ASSERT IT IN YOURSELF!**"

The rule of false humility does not serve children becoming strong. If they cannot give themselves deserving praise and no one is around to give it to them, then there is no reward for positive behavior. Some people claim they do not need praise because, "Doing a job well is praise enough." If that were true, then why do they so readily praise everyone else!? And why are we so encouraged and pleased when we get praise? Doing a job well is praise enough, if you can self-praise when you deserve it whether or not anyone else can or will. Adults often need to be first to



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break the rule of false humility so that their children can see and experience the adults' model of self-acknowledgement. Once again, the adults' ability to love themselves gives a healthy model for children to love themselves. Teaching children to self-praise leads to the next guideline to building Self-Esteem in children.



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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-emancipated 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 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.



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“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 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



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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.

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



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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!**

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



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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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Chapter 37

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



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I ask them, "Do you do what some kids 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 of) the desire to be perfect. It



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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 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?*



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“It was Anna.”

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



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interactions equals 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 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.



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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 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’ wanna hear no mo’ excuses that ya’ll don’ have ‘nuf time! The message



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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.