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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Chapter 1

DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Billy?... (looks out and spots Billy in the back of the room) -- present.

Susie?... (there she is... little wallflower) -- present.

Glenn?... (uh... cute as usual) -- present.

Kathleen?... (there she is... for now!) -- present.

Mark?... (where is he? In the back? No, that's Brian. Hmmm? Is he here today? Hmmm? No, not over there... no, not over there...)

*Mark? Has anyone seemed Mark today? Hmmm? I guess... I guess he's not here today. Not present. (Mark's not here! **Mark is not here! Mark is not here! MARK IS NOT HERE !!! YES!**)*

*No Mark tantrums! No Mark fights! No Mark arguments! **IT'S TIME FOR A CELEBRATION! IT'S GOING TO BE A GREAT DAY TODAY!** No Mark interruptions to distract the other kids. No Mark whining to take me from the others. Going be able to get work done today. **It's going to be a GREAT day! MARK IS NOT HERE TODAY!!***

Not your darling! No... It can't be your darling whose absence causes celebration among his/her teacher. Well, sometimes it is your darling! Or, maybe your darling is the invisible child who never causes any trouble but is also virtually unknown to the teacher and the other children because he/she is so quiet. Or, is yours the fidgety one? The "yes...but" kid. You know the one who, "yes is bright, but is so active!" Or, "yes is very sweet, but can't keep his/her hands or feet still." Or, yes, is well liked, but always has to be first. How do your darlings become the children of kindergarten, elementary school, middle and high school? How do they become the good, great, and... uh... other kids? How do they become the good, great, and other academic and social successes or failures of school and other future communities? Harsh as it may sound, when I tell the little vignette above to teachers from preschool age to elementary to high school, I get uproarious laughter, knowing nods, and teachers pointing fingers at each other. There are children that become so frustrating to teachers that they virtually celebrate when such children DO NOT come to class. Does this happen due to the dynamics of the classroom, the playground, or the home, the family, and the neighborhood, or the media? The anger is the classic therapist answer... it depends! There are many aspects and circumstances that contribute to a child's success or failure. The home, the family, the neighborhood, the class, the playground, and even the media are the communities every child grows up and develops in. Each and every one of these communities influences the child's development and predicts his/her future success or failure in other communities. A young child's future communities include middle and high school, college, various formal and informal teams, performing groups, clubs, partnerships (platonic and romantic, unofficial and legally sanctioned), the workplace, places of spiritual fellowship, family configurations of many kinds, and more. Success or failure of a child as he/she grows up can be measured not in academic or financial success, or in trophies of achievement, or in accumulation of



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material things, but in his/her ability to function well in a community. The purpose of discipline then is to prepare and promote success community membership.

HOW COME... WHAT FOR?

Discipline serves to direct a child towards appropriate behavior. However, the appropriate behavior that is taught in his/her first community, the family in its home may or may not match what is considered appropriate behavior in his/her future and other communities. This is often quickly discovered with early visits to grandma's and grandpa's where expectations may differ significantly. Or, at the grocery store versus in ones own home. And, sometimes the behavior expectations in ones own home change with additions or subtractions to the family community. When guests are present, suddenly the dress code changes. Running around in just a diaper or your underwear, acceptable and normal at all other times becomes unacceptable. Or, when dad's gone, the sleep arrangements or the dinner or snack menu changes drastically! The first training ground of socialization, that is, for the child to behave appropriately in his/her society at large is in the miniature society of the family. When the socialization expectations of the family are a relative match for the expectations of the later and larger societies, then the child may be prepared for (or at least, not surprised by) them. In addition, certain societies or communities (including families) are more or less functional... are more or less healthy. A child who comes prepared with healthy behavior expectations of a functional healthy family may be surprised by a dysfunctional or unhealthy society or community (new family, classroom, workplace, or even larger institution) will still be more readily able to survive and possibly (hopefully) strive to foster functionality and health in it. A child who comes with dysfunctional or unhealthy behavioral expectations may be "successful" in a larger matching community but with a continuing of the psychological and emotional destruction he/she has suffered in his/her family. Or, in a differing yet still dysfunctional and unhealthy community, he/she will lack a healthy psychological emotional foundation... a healthy model to deal with it for him/herself and others. Sometimes a family may adapt "successfully" to its challenging child, that is, form a workable family community for him/her. However, he/she may be able to be successful only in the family community, and be left unprepared for the greater community. A family may make accommodations in the home that allow for the child's challenging behavior that few if any others in any other community (grandparents, neighborhoods, playgrounds, school, etc.) would be willing to make.

MARK- FALLING INTO COMMUNITIES

Mark was a very challenging child at 3 years old. He was very active, very loud, and very impulsive. He was a sweetheart, but... (another "yes, but..." kid) his energy and lack of awareness of others in his world caused him to antagonize just everyone outside of his parents. His parents loved him and his 4-year-old brother dearly, of course. And, they understood his energy and largely accepted it. They made accommodations to help him: he got more time than his brother to get his clothes on, plenty of warning when there was going to be a transition, few if any trips shopping with only one parent (always two parents- one to shop and one to watch him, or leaving him at home in the first place), curtailed social activities that would be too difficult for impulsive Mark to handle), and so forth. Their major accommodation was change their life and community to fit his abilities. Respecting a child's personality and individuality is a highly honorable principle. However, in the extreme it misses out on the need for socialization. In other words, since most people don't become hermits, individuals function for the most part in communities of one kind or another. Balancing the individual needs and personality with community needs and standards is the key challenge. In a sense, they did a "reverse socialization"- rather than socializing



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Mark to their community and needs as they had done with his older brother, they socialized (adapted and changed themselves) to his personality, despite his personality bringing negativity, ostracizing, and punishment from society. There are times when society would be well served to be more accepting and less arbitrarily demanding of conformity, and respect a person's individuality. However, respecting individuality must not mean allowing people to express their individuality in ways that are intrusive or destructive of others safety, sanity, security, and serenity. As soon as Mark stepped out of his family and into another community, his behavior started drawing often very severely adverse consequences upon him. In his neighborhood, as much as they liked his brother, the other children found him to be annoying and rude. If he wanted to get something, somehow he would bump into, step on, and knock over several kids to get it. If there was a new toy in the neighborhood, when Mark got through with it, it was often broken or damaged. He soon became unwelcome in his neighbors' houses, as the parents got tired of him jumping on furniture, breaking vases, and upsetting their children. Nobody liked him. Most of the kids HATED him. His preschool teachers didn't like him either. He made their lives crazy! Although, they were professional and refrained from labeling him a "bad boy", their body language, facial expressions, and their tone of voice were clear communications of their dislike for him. As much as adults try to make a distinction between the behavior and the child him/herself, when the behavior is consistently troublesome and the adults' frustration becomes extreme, then the child becomes the negative behavior and the negative behavior becomes the child. And of course, his self-esteem plummeted. He had high self-esteem from his family... his parents loved him! His grandparents loved him! But no one else loved enough to tolerate his behavior. He was a "bad boy" to just about everyone else.

Devastated by the rejection that he suffered daily in his neighborhood, Mark tried desperately to be accepted. By the time he was 5, he was willing to do just about anything to get accepted by the neighborhood kids. Unfortunately, the neighborhood included some less than kind kids... predatory kids. Mark became so needy for acceptance that these kids could talk him into doing just about anything not matter how harmful or dangerous. One time they convinced him to take off all of his clothes and lie naked on the sidewalk as a human ramp for them to ride their bicycles over! Luckily, his grandmother happened to drive up just in time to stop it, as four kids from age 7 to 10 were about to coming tearing down the sidewalk on their bicycles to run him over. Life became even more difficult for him when he entered Kindergarten. He had the misfortune of entering a class with a teacher who should have retired but hadn't. She should have retired because she was "real tired" of working with challenging children! In her community, the classroom, Mark's behavior was quickly determined to be outrageous and intolerable. She quickly decided that Mark was a problem child, along with another 5 of the 11 boys in the class (more than half the boys were problem children?!). As the manager of the community, her negativity about Mark made his daily misery so overwhelming that he became a Kindergarten dropout before the Christmas break. He had fallen into two communities, his neighborhood and his Kindergarten class that his first community had failed to prepare for... and he suffered for it.

FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Discipline comes from the inside out in many ways. It comes from the inside the emotional and psychological history of the adults. Then it moves out into the world of the child as development challenges them. When a person is mature, discipline that has become part of his/her internalized moral and behavioral codes moves from inside out to his/her relationships and life. Discipline also develops its basic rules and guidelines inside the family and then is followed and expressed out in



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larger communities of school and work. As a former preschool teacher, director, and owner, as a former elementary and secondary school teacher, and as a consultant to educational and youth service programs, as well as a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, I have experienced many children who have significant difficulties dealing with mainstream group expectations (in the preschool, elementary, middle, and secondary classrooms and playgrounds). Often times, their difficulties come from the mismatch between family, that is, parent to child socialization and the larger group. Functionally, parents with a smaller ratio of adults to children (two parents to the one first-born, or adopted child in a coupled partnership) can get away with a style of discipline that involves intensive supervision and little or no self-management on the part of the children. In other words, children may not be taught or be expected to internalize behavioral boundaries. Adults stay vigilant and even hyper-vigilant and/or restrictive to prevent their children from crossing any boundaries. They will hold the cup of milk for their children, never leave them alone with a pet, bathe the child even past when they are developmentally ready to do it themselves, intervene with other children for their children when there is a conflict, choose and buy their children's clothes even when they wish to begin making such decisions themselves, tell them which classes to take or not take... which sports or activities to do or not do, and make sure their teen and young adult children make the RIGHT... that is correct... that is PERFECT choices in life!

DISCIPLINE COMES FROM DISCIPLE

Such an approach to discipline moves away from the concept of "discipline" relating to being a "disciple," that is, learning and conforming to a healthy and positive way of life taught or promoted by a more experienced and wiser individual or group. Of course, some of us as adults may not be all that wise despite our experience! The wise person learns from others' mistakes, the average person learns from his/her own mistakes, and the fool never learns despite his/her many mistakes. The most difficult thing for a parent or adult is to watch children make mistakes... usually the same mistakes the adult make him/herself when younger. Often, parents try to force their children to make the "right" choices. However, that often backfires creating highly defiant and acting out children. Or, depressed and anxious children unable to make their own choices when it becomes time to do so. The Chinese calligraphy for "learning" is made up of the words "study" and "practice." Without practice, study does not create learning; one never gets the experience that promotes and solidifies the learning. Without study, practice does not create learning; one never examines the experiences for positive or negative consequences and determination of good principles. Practice does not make perfect. However, practice is necessary for learning. And, practice includes and accepts mistakes as part of children's learning process of how to have a healthy and successful life and relationships. To coordinate this principle with the principle of discipline coming from the inside out, this means that parents need to allow the family to be the practice place for behavior, dealing with personality and conflicts, stress and disappointments- the practice place for socialization. This means teaching problem-solving skills, presenting clear models of expected and appropriate behavior both in the family and in larger communities, and appropriate consequences for both positive and negative behaviors.



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Chapter 2

SOCIALIZATION FAILURES- THE YUCKY KIDS

Here comes the Billy, the super hero! Fly through the air... Smash! Blast! Boom! Throw the bad guy down! Kick him! (Chucky screams in pain) "Oh...you ok, Chucky? I'm sorry."

Run to the table... bump the others kids at the table... shake the table and make the blocks fall... ("Billy! Stop!") "Huh?... " loudly, "Hey, I can I play?"

Push through the kids and get to the drinking fountain... take a long drink...("Billy, hurry up!") "ah" take another long drink... "aah" smack your lips... take another long long drink. "Billy, hurry up. We want to drink too!" take another long slow drink... "aah" done... no, one more sip...ok, "Hey, can I play?"

Here comes the rocket ship! Captain Billy soaring through the universe... Smash! Blast! Boom! Gotta ram the bad alien's spaceship! Kablam! (Chucky screams in pain) "Oh...you ok, Chucky? I'm sorry."

"It's mine! Give it to me! (grab and push) I got it! Na na na na na! (run away with the toy).

"Happy Birthday to Davie...Happy Birthday to DAVIE DOO DOO HEAD! HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO DAVIE DOO DOO HEAD!...ha ha ha... Davie DOO DOO HEAD! Davie, do you want to play monsters?"

Here comes Spiderman Billy! Zoom through the air... Smash! Blast! Boom! Throw a punch at the bad guy! Get him! (Chucky screams in pain) "Oh...you ok, Chucky? I'm really sorry."

(later at home...) "Mommy, nobody likes me (sniff... sniff). They call me 'yucky Billy!'"

The Billy of the above was not a mean or intentionally hurtful child by any means. He was a very kind and delightful child full of vitality. He was not angry or anxious. However, he was at great risk to suffer the consequences of his behavior regardless. In his home, his energy and exuberance was accepted as "that's our Billy!" His parents and his older siblings made accommodations for him. Unfortunately, the communities that our children will live and function in both as youngsters and as adults are not as accepting or as forgiving as the first family community. Sometimes, neither children nor adults realize this causing great harm to the children's relationships, academic and vocational options, and overall life happiness throughout time.

NO ONE LOVES YOU THAT MUCH TO...

As a therapist, I once was working with (in contrast to sweet little Billy) a particularly obnoxious teenager named Calvin. He was consistently rude to adults and perceived alternately as funny and crude by his peers. His parent although loving were at a loss of what to do. His negative attitude was particularly foul this session. It must have been a rough day... a rough week... a rough month... a rough life so far for him. Without a doubt, he had many reasons to have a bad attitude: social, economic, family challenges and traumas abounded. However, the most empathetic and socially conscious person can tolerate only so much of hostile and nasty messages and action



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directed at him/her without beginning to reciprocate the anger and dislike. I had a fair understanding and even empathy for his situation and the circumstances and history of his life that brought him to this attitude. However, nasty is nasty and rude is rude... and super-nasty and super-rude is super-nasty and super-rude, and then there was Calvin! Maybe Mother Teresa or Gandhi or some other saintly person could still smile and turn the other cheek. Unfortunately, I ran out of cheeks! Fortunately, I was self-aware of my rising anger and resentment at his continued disrespect and hostility, and how he had antagonized many other adult professionals in and around school. I was able to present back appropriately and therapeutically, rather than just reciprocate with disrespect, hostility, and rejection. However, I chose to respond in a fashion that would both fit into his "street" style and communication and hopefully, provoke some self-awareness.

After he had retorted to a simple question with his usual litany of profanity and disrespect, I told him, "You know nobody in the real world is going to put up with your disrespect and abuse. No one in the real world loves you that much to put up your disrespect. You think your teachers love or like you enough to put up with this? The only reason they put up with your abuse at all is that they are professionals and it's their job to try to help you... in other words, because they get paid to do this! You think they would put up with your disrespect over and over because they like you? You think I love or like you enough to put up with your abuse? I get paid too! And you know what? They don't pay me enough! In the real world with real people... not paid professionals when you are still a child, but in the real world, real people don't... nobody loves you enough to keep putting up with your disrespect and abuse- they'll fire you, divorce you, ostracize you... maybe beat the heck out of you! No one loves you that much to put up with your disrespect and abuse... except maybe your parents... and they're getting tired of you too!" I was purposefully provocative because he had been so stuck in his negativity and even feeling entitled to be hateful and hurtful. He had not been confronted successfully, nor had the reality of the consequences of his behavior clearly and blunted reflected back to him. He was surprised with vehemence of my response. It did get his attention. Unfortunately, the best that I was able to do with this intervention, was to get him to pause a second to consider (primarily, because it was so blunt) the relevance of my feedback regarding his future relationships. I could see clearly that if he maintained his social deviance, he would undoubtedly suffer for it. Hopefully, he would see it too... eventually.

SOCIALLY CARING BUT SOCIALLY INEPT

Many (hopefully, most) children are not so severe in their social response to others and to their own issues; they do not overtly and defiantly deviate from social norms. However, a child does not have to be a social deviant to be punished by his/her peers and society. Someone who is not hostile or disrespectful... who is not filled with anger and hatred, may still be ostracized by his/her peers because he/she is not in tune to the rhythms of the group, or conversant in the social language of peers, or is hyper-focused to his/her own needs at the cost of peer awareness, or has some other blockage or interference in receiving or sending social communication. Children and adults, who may be good-hearted and with positive intentions, if they are poorly socialized to community expectations become the socially inept. The socially inept are also punished by society. Each community has its own sets of expectations, rules, and consequences. These are often not expressly articulated as clear "to-do's" and "don't do's." Many of these expectations and rules are implicitly taught and monitored. Often, one only figures out them out over time as one clue after another has been communicated about the propriety or impropriety of the behavior. No one says overtly that something will not be okay, but once the transgression has been committed, then the



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disapproval is conveyed or the punishment is administered. In other words, you don't know until after the fact that a line has been crossed... sometimes, you didn't even know there was a line!

LEARNING THE ELEVATOR RULES

For example, there are the "elevator rules." When asked for the "elevator rules", most people give you a bemused look. When encouraged, they tentatively start to propose some rules with a growing realization that they DO know the "elevator rules." Stand facing towards the door. Avoid eye contact, especially after the door closes. Don't talk to the other people in the elevator. If you must talk to someone, whisper. Put your hands either by your sides or in front of you- NEVER behind your back (you might TOUCH someone!). And, watch the lights indicating the floors as if they are interesting! How did all of us learn the elevator rules? Don't you remember that wonderful day, when your Mom or Dad or both, told you, "Son (or Daughter), you're grown up now. You're ready to learn the elevator rules!" You don't remember? Well, that is because we all learned implicitly with the looks and hushes from parents what was ok and not ok when we went into that magical little moving room when we were little, curious, and spontaneous. As innocuous as knowing the elevator rules may seem, when someone does violate the rules, he/she is perceived with anything from bemusement to disdain to anger (especially, if he/she is an adult). There are many other social rules. What is an appropriate time to call someone later in the evening? Up until 9 pm? ... until 10 pm? ... until 11 pm? What about a thank you note for a present? Is a verbal heartfelt thanks enough? How many times do you offer? How many times do you decline an offer before accepting?

I WANTED THAT LAST PIECE

One time many years ago, some friends had come over for dinner: Don and his girlfriend. We had bought a delicious strawberry cream pie for dessert. After serving everyone a piece of pie, there was only one piece left. In due time, everyone had finished with their piece of pie. I asked our female friend, our kids, and my wife if they wanted the last piece. All of them were honestly quite full and satisfied and declined. I asked Don if he wanted the last piece. He said no. So... so, I took and ate the last piece! Don who is Japanese-American later that night on their way home, told his girlfriend that he had wanted that last piece of pie! He said he thought that I was going to offer it to him again and insist on him taking it. Then he would demur a couple of times more, but when I would still insist, then he was going to accept it and eat it. "I wanted that last piece!" His girlfriend with great delight, told him that with Ronald, he had only one chance to get the pie! Later on, when they told us the story, we all had a good laugh. My wife who is also Japanese-American understood immediately what had happened. She too had been taught that one was always supposed to decline an offer four times before accepting it. It was the proper, polite, and gracious way to accept any generosity. On my part, I was supposed to insist, insist, insist, and then insist one more time to show my generosity and graciousness as a host. Unfortunately with my different upbringing, my "host" rules were to genuinely offer him the last piece and take his response as his honest desire! Yep, that second piece of pie sure was good too! Fortunately, we were all close friends and also all one to three generations removed from the original immigration in our families (less "Old Country" and more Americanized), and Don did not reject our (that is, my) friendship due to this cross-cultural miscommunication. On the other hand, this type of miscommunication (social or cultural ineptness)- no matter how innocent can be interpreted as rudeness or disrespect. On a larger scale, in other countries this has given rise to the term "Ugly American"- that is, an American who is insensitive and disrespectful of the people and culture of the country he/she is visiting. Without intending to, such a person commits social gaffs that



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alienate the people of the country. In your neighborhood or own home, this can cause major disconnection between parents and teenagers as misinterpretations of motivation and intent are seen as disrespectful from either or both sides. On the playground or in the classroom, very nice children who are unaware of the expectations of the teachers or of their peers can be labeled “yucky,” mean, bad, or worse be ostracized.

Discipline is a primary way to help socialize children to the expectations of the greater society and to specific communities. The model they are presented in their own families as to what is appropriate is critical to socialization. When they deviate from that model, then often discipline is appropriate in teaching healthy socialization. There are differences between discipline and management. In addition, a child’s perspective is vital to finding motivation for socialization/discipline.



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Chapter 3

NOW AND NOT-NOW

If you eat all that candy, you'll get sick later. NOT-NOW

This candy is yummy. Eat another piece. NOW!

Remember you ate too much candy at Sally's birthday party, and you got sick. NOT-NOW

I love chocolate! NOW!

You better go to bed early, or else you'll be tired for school tomorrow. NOT-NOW

The movie is almost over. Just another 30 minutes. NOW!

Your teacher said you were cranky last time you didn't get enough sleep. NOT-NOW

This is the best part coming up. NOW!

I really need to watch out that I don't charge up too much on my credit card again. NOT-NOW

That outfit is beautiful. It looks great on me! And, it's on sale. NOW!

I got that bill coming in... and the car payment on the 15th... and Joe's birthday... NOT-NOW

It's been a bummer of a day. I could use a pick-me-up. And, it's on sale. NOW!

Before = NOT-NOW;

Later = NOT-NOW;

NOT-NOW is NOT RELEVANT;

What is relevant? NOW, and only NOW!

The developmental sense of time for a young child is based on NOW and NOT-NOW. The only thing that is relevant for a young child is what serves or disserves him/her in his/her immediate situation and immediate presence. Does it taste good NOW? Does he/she want it NOW? Will it give him/her pleasure NOW? Will it satisfy a desire, need, craving, or wish NOW? If the answer is yes, then the behavior or response will be assertive because only NOW matters. What happened before (the stomach aches, the empty purse, the achy body, the temper tantrums...) which could be lessons about cause and effect, which if integrated in a continuum of understanding about the functioning of the world (of money, of your body, of relationships, and so forth) does not matter because before is NOT-NOW, NOT-NOW is not relevant, and only NOW matters! What may probably or even definitely happen later... the consequences of the present choices (often negative consequences such as pain, debt, frustration, or diminished relationships), which if understood also in terms of cause and effect would help children (and others!) predict and prepare for later circumstances and demands of survival and performance, also does not matter because later is also NOT-NOW, NOT-NOW is not relevant, and only NOW matters. While this is developmentally



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acceptable and understandable with younger children, older children, teenagers, and many adults continue to function as if anything that is NOT-NOW is not relevant, and incur major financial debt, weight gain, health problems, lost academic, vocational, and career opportunities, and compromised if not destroyed relationships. How much do you as the parent or teacher- the adult model the wisdom of experience (NOT-NOW before) and the discipline of delayed gratification (NOT-NOW later)? The wise person learns from the mistakes/experiences of others, the average person learns from his/her own mistakes/experiences, and the fool does not learn despite his/her own mistakes/experiences. Wisdom is often gained from foolishness. As the models and guides for children, we often try to gift to our children the “wisdom” (gained from being stupid as we developed and grew as quite the average people in our NOW’s, and then are surprised that our children often prove to be very human (and average just like us) in their indulgence in NOW.

REMEMBERING – PREDICTING – AND NOW, TOO!

What does that mean for discipline and teaching for children and their behavior? That adults are to give up the “before” and the “later” lessons, the lessons about cause and effect, and the responsibility of ones previous choices affecting ones life currently and of current choices having consequences not only in the immediate but also for the future? Absolutely not! Good parenting and positive discipline includes reminding children of prior choices and lessons learned (this applies to larger communities than the family and classroom- “those who fail to study history are doomed to repeat it”), and helping them realize the consequences of choices extend into the future in predictable and often manageable ways. Decisions and choices are package deals- package deals that often include both positive and negative results. The decision to eat the chocolate cake is a package deal. Included in the package is not only the immediate sensual pleasure of the decadent cake, but also the additional calories, the pimples, the added inches, and especially the future guilt! Unlike the smorgasbord buffet, you may not choose to have what you like and leave behind what you don’t. A prior decision delivers the additional aspects of the package whether you want to take delivery or not. A current choice delivers a time capsule that may explode upon you later.

As adults teach about choices and consequence, discipline become effective when they do not only count on prior lessons and later consequences to motivate good choices. NOT-NOW remains not relevant unless it becomes relevant NOW. Remind children of before and warn them about later, but also set motivation and consequences NOW for both proper and inappropriate choices. For example, “Honey, calm down. Last time you got into trouble fighting with your sister. You won’t like being on restriction again.” If the child responds appropriately, then reminding them of before and later is sufficient. It is noteworthy that there is an implicit imperative in the above message. It says, “you better not...” rather than explicitly saying, “you may not...” or “Stop it!” The implicit imperative is a social communication mechanism to avoid sounding too controlling or demanding, however it is still an imperative command. In other words, this is what you are required to do. Some adults have learned this graceful manner to maintain social harmony while asserting control or command (as may be required of their role as supervisors, bosses, teachers, etc.). However, with a child (or defiant teenagers or contrary adults), this communication style can backfire on parents. The child, not hearing a overt command to stop the behavior... to not eat the additional cookie can chose to interpret the statements as permission to continue; the absence of a clear negative is an implied positive! Making a very clear (perhaps very assertive) command, “Thou shall stop!” “Thou shall not eat the fifth cookie!” removes any ambiguity of your expectations. With the clear command, there is only one current implied consequence that applies NOW- your



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displeasure, disapproval, or disappointment. For some children and people, this is adequate motivation for them to make a better choice; it is a sufficiently impactful consequence to experience NOW to change behavior NOW. On the other hand, that may not be enough.

OR ELSE!

NOW it would be time for the big guns!! NOW would be time for the “... or else!” “Stop it, NOW! You got in trouble before and that wasn’t any fun. You’re going to be very unhappy later if you continue. Stop it or you will be on timeout NOW!” “No more cookies. You got sick before and you’ll get sick again pigging out on cookies. Stop bothering me about it or else you won’t get ___ later.” Although, you are teaching the cause and effect dynamics of before and later, you also present an immediate highly tangible consequence to direct the child towards the appropriate choice or behavior... NOW! Once that is clear (and hopefully effective), then the child can be gently reminded of how NOT-NOW (before) became NOW at a later time and negative consequences suffered. “Gently” is the operative attitude so that such reminders don’t become shaming “I told you so!” “You know, the toy you really wanted last week used up all the money so you don’t have enough to go to the show today. That’s too bad.” In addition, when NOT-NOW (later) becomes NOW, when there has been good choices made, you can enthusiastically remind the child that he/she does not have to suffer the negative consequences that would have arrived with the previous poor choice avoided. “You almost spent all your money last week on that toy and then you wouldn’t have enough money to go to the show today. Good thing you decided to save your money!”

There will other times and situations where it is not a matter of doing or not doing something, or of a good versus a bad choice (appropriate versus inappropriate) but rather of one choice that is more beneficial long term versus another choice that may be immediately satisfying but problematic later. Then it may become a judgment call whether or not you should allow your child to make the “negative” or poor choice. In my articles (also on this web site) on Building Self-Esteem, in V.2.5 Consequences in Power and Control- “That’s Not Fair,” I discuss a situation where I allowed my daughter to make a poor choice and allowed a negative consequence to arise. In that situation, rather than letting the negative consequence happen, we chose to use it as a learning opportunity for her to teach her about choices. We gave her another option (but did NOT rescue her or say “never mind” to the consequences) that gave her the opportunity to learn her lesson without suffering the consequence. She took the opportunity and did learn an important lesson about choices and consequences that she has lived and followed through on ever since. In other cases, however, it may be prudent or even necessary given the situation or your child’s personality to let the negative consequence happen.

LIKABILITY, VALIDATION, ACCEPTANCE, & CONNECTION

The boundaries, presented with consequences and choices seem to imply that a child’s major motivation in his/her behavior is whether or not he/she gets punished. There will be some children that this becomes very relevant. Certainly, there are some “spirited” or “willful” children that seem only to respond to negative consequences. On the other hand, even these so-called difficult children in their NOW worlds are looking for positive things from the people in their worlds. Or, to put it another way, once there is a security of stable boundaries and consequences... of predictability in their caregivers’ relationships with them, children look to be liked, validated, accepted, and connected NOW. Being liked by family, peers, and caregivers happens in the moment and accumulates over many moments from the NOT-NOW of before, through NOW the



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present, and to the NOT-NOW of later. “Honey, remember how mad Suzy was at you when you hit her? I don’t like you when you’re mean to her. We’ll both be mad at you if you keep hitting.” Validation, acceptance, and connection also can be expressed for positive behavior over time. “You were such a nice kid when you helped her. We can count on you to be a great kid that helps. You’re our super helper.” However, if the liability, validation, acceptance, and connection are about how the child used to be or do, or what he/she would gain later IF he/she does this or that, then the reference again becomes at the NOT-NOW time- the not relevant time. Liking, validating, accepting, and connection needs to be offered NOW for the NOW oriented child to be effective.

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE & CONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE

Some people may criticize this as offering conditional approval or acceptance of the child based on his/her behavior when they feel that a child should get unconditional love. Every child should get unconditional love. However, the world is high conditional in how it perceives children and people. If my neighbor is rude to me, I have no unconditional love for him or her. If a store clerk is dismissive of me, then I don’t like the clerk... or the store! The real world does not have unconditional love for your child. If your child is obnoxious and disruptive to a person in a public place, that person does not accept your child. If your child tears the library book, the librarian does not approve of your child’s behavior or your child. The real world has normally (aside from a few wonderful teachers and other saints) only conditional like (not love!) for your child, or for that matter, for you or anyone else. As a parent or primary caregiver, your unconditional love should not be distorted to become unconditional acceptance of any behavior whatsoever. Love your child unconditionally AND conditionally like, validate, and accept his/her behavior based on the appropriateness of his/her choices. NOT-NOW later will punish your child if he/she makes poor choices. It is the loving parent who has the patience and the investment to take the time and energy to teach those NOT-NOW principles and lessons. Others will not. They will take the simple solution in most cases, and reject your child.

When is it a good time to hold your child responsible for his/her choices? When should he/she receive the consequences of his/her choices? From the real estate world, when is it a good time to buy? NOW! Always NOW! If it becomes too much trouble NOW for you to battle your child... if you don’t want the discomfort of asserting boundaries NOW... if you rather “enjoy” your child NOW... if you prefer your head buried in the sand NOW, then when NOT-NOW later arrives and becomes NOW, remember... I told you so!



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Chapter 4

I'M BORED... TO DREAMS AND VISIONS

I'm bored. Hmmm? I wonder what would happen if I pull on that thread?

I wonder what would happen if I put the bead in my nose?

I wonder what would happen if I stuck the fork in the electric outlet?

I wonder what would happen if I bounced higher?

I wonder what would happen if I said, "I hate you?!"

I wonder what would happen if I ignored mom?

I'm bored. Hmmm? I wonder what would happen if I did the dare?

I wonder what would happen if I took a hit?

I wonder what would happen if I let him... ya know, if I let him...

Children may complain occasionally that they are bored, but actually they don't know how to be bored. As they start to get bored, they do something to stimulate or entertain themselves. Perhaps to attract attention, whether positive or negative. They wonder... or they dream. What they do can be fairly benign- a bored child plays with the loose thread on her tights. She pulls and pokes it and eventually it becomes a big hole... another ruined set of tights. Another bored child may create a minor household medical crisis- this is interesting... it's small... my nostril is small too... they're about the same size... I wonder if it'll fit? "Mom! Dad! Help! Something's stuck in my nose!" Just why do kids stick things into their nose, anyway? Because it's there! Popcorn, erasers, beans, rocks, beads... My craziest experience with kids and sticking things in their nose? One time one of the teachers was playing with candle wax with the children. Candle wax when it is still warm and hasn't hardened is very supple and totally stirs the sensory curiosity of children. For some reason as the teacher was giving children turns with it, the little demon inside Mikey suddenly prompted him, "Mikey! Quick, Mikey snatch that wax and stick it up your nose!" And, that's just what Mikey did! And then, the wax did what wax does- it cooled and hardened! It made for an interesting visit at the doctor's office. That was the only way anyone could get it out.

WHAT FOR?

Other times, the self-stimulation or attempts to entertain oneself can lead to more serious problems. Relationships can be harmed, negative physical consequences, and emotional and psychological damage can be incurred. Taking a dare to deal with boredom can be dangerous, since most dares are to do something risky... and stupid! "I dare you to jump off the roof... I dare you drink a beer... I dare you to cut across the railroad tracks in front of the train... I dare you to skip class..." Or, when there is not anything that is meaningful in ones life, then trying to find meaning (not be bored) through morally questionable activities becomes more probable. What leads otherwise



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mature young people to make questionable decisions about alcohol, drugs, sexual behavior, and risk taking?

A few years ago, I was working simultaneously with two 17-year-old teenage boys. One young man was a straight A student (actually 4.0+ grade point average with advance placement classes) who had always excelled in school. He had his choice of college; colleges were competing to recruit him. The other young man had struggled in school since late elementary school with learning disabilities. He was in the continuation alternative high school for dropouts and marginal behavior kids. College was a joke... getting a high school diploma was questionable. As different as these two young men seemed to be, they both faced the same dilemma in their lives- neither one had a sense of purpose. "What for?" was the question both of them asked. School was very difficult for the young man with dyslexia. "You need to go to school," was the command to him, and his response was "What for?" Going to school meant feeling stupid and miserable. Or, was very boring. "You need to get an education." "What for?" The only thing that made him feel good was hanging out with his friends, including drinking beer and smoking pot. His parents said, "You need to stop drinking and partying." "What for?" "You'll mess up your life. You have to look ahead." "What for?" What was happening right now was what was important to him. Later, was not now, which was not relevant. Beneath his bravado, however, was the fear and understanding that the future was tenuous and foreboding, and as a result, he was depressed. His depression was present and stressful. Alcohol, drugs, and partying helped him self-medicate his ever-present depression. His depression was present and real, but a future was hypothetical and ambiguous. Stop partying? "What for?" There wasn't an answer in the present to that "What for?" So, alcohol, drugs, and partying continued to make sense in the absence of a future vision to strive for.

The academic performer heard comments too and answered each the same way. "You need to keep up those high grades." "What for?" "So, you can get into a good college." "What for?" "So, you can get a good job." "What for?" "So, you can have a nice house and lifestyle." "What for?" As successful as he had always been in school, as talented as he was academically, as many options as he had before him, he didn't have a dream to strive for. He didn't have a vision of what he might do or be. And as a result, he faced a classic existential question as to whether he had a purpose in his life. He was worse than bored. Erik Erikson, psychologist and theorist said that in the last of his Eight Ages of Man, that each person would face a crisis between integrity and despair. At the last stage of life, a person would look back at his/her entire life and ask the question, "Did I live a life of meaning? Did my existence make any difference in the world? Did I live a life of integrity? Or, did my existence make no difference?" If a person feels that he/she did have an effect on the world... on others, then he/she has a sense of integrity. If he/she led a wasteful and meaningless life, then he/she will feel despair. Erikson's Ages also cycle several times in each individual's life. This young man, despite his academic success, did not have a sense of purpose as he dropped into depression. In fact, he began questioning his continued academic efforts. For both of these young men, I recommended that they begin a search for a dream or vision- to find a purpose in their lives. The adult discipline response in this situation was not to punish but to help find motivation.

WITHOUT A DREAM, VISION OR PURPOSE, EVERYTHING IS TOO HARD

When you have a dream or vision that you are striving for, then there is a purpose to your life. What is hard, becomes a challenge. Barriers that block you, become obstacles to be circumvented.



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Being tired becomes rewarding. When you don't have a reason... a compelling motivation, then just about everything becomes too hard and too much trouble. When I started my career change from education to counseling, I didn't know how hard it was going to be. I had come to realize that the curriculum of individual, family, and human growth was what I was truly interested in, rather than the curriculum of reading, math, and other early childhood development. I began my career transition with a plan to complete a master's program in psychology in two years, and then complete my training and hours of experience to take my licensing exam in an additional two years- a total of four years. Then reality set in! Self-employed as the owner of a preschool and daycare program w/ dozens of kids and a small staff (eventually closing it and directing another person's program), married with two young children, and involved in a practicum in addition to the master's coursework, it took me twice as long to finish the master's than I had hoped. By the time I passed my license exams it was a total of seven years. Many a time, I felt overwhelmed with my multiple responsibilities and workload. It was hard! Really hard. However, my dream was to become a therapist. Without that, it would have been too hard. To be honest, if I had known how much work it was going to take, I wonder if I would have even tried. When the workload was too much and the stress level was at its highest, it was the passion for the dream that kept me focused... that kept me at it. Without a dream, vision, or purpose, everything is too hard.

EVEN THE WILDEST DREAMS

When children are young, they can have fairly grandiose and fantastic dreams. Encourage their dreams. When the children are very young, you should support just about any dreams they have. Dreams are about passion and energy. The drive for even the wildest dreams can lead a child forward. Many people strive for dreams that they do not achieve. However, as they strive toward their unfulfilled and perhaps unfulfillable dreams, they move forward in life, experience things, achieve progress, obtain credentials, and otherwise expose themselves to or prepare themselves for a new dream or purpose. Being an educator was my first professional dream; owning and running my own program was my vision; and when I decided later to become a therapist, the experiences (including academic credentials) placed me significantly toward that new goal. In fact, without having experienced the process and achievements of that original dream, I would not have realized my new and more fulfilling dream was that of being a therapist. I have a friend from high school who had dreamed as a child of being a professional athlete. He was passionately involved with sports even after it became clear that he couldn't keep up athletically on the school yard, much less at higher competitive levels. He stayed the sports knowledge "geek" throughout high school and into college. To make a long story short, he gave up one dream but that dream led him to find fulfillment in a related profession. He eventually traveled the world as a coach to world-class and Olympic champion athletes. Support very young children's wild dreams because they will provide the passion for them to risk, to try things, to stretch themselves, and to discover new visions. In addition, as you help children explore new things, they do not become bored. Remember when they get bored, that is when they do things to entertain themselves!

Expose children to what is possible through meeting people, activities, travel, books, and other media. Unless they can see someone... especially someone like them, who has done or been something or somewhere, it is difficult for them to see what is possible. If a girl sees a woman who has flown into space, if a poor child meets someone from lower class origins who is a business success, if a student with dyslexia meets an adult dyslexic who has achieved, if a child of color sees successful adults of color, and so forth, they learn it is possible for them to achieve their dreams as well. And who is most like your children? As the adult role models in their lives, you



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offer what is possible in the most compelling manner. Former All-Star pitcher Dave Stewart of the Oakland A's was once asked by a sports reporter who his role models were. Clearly, the reporter expected Dave Stewart to mention some sports role models, or perhaps some peers or mentors that he had. Dave Stewart's response was, "My parents. Who else should be my role models!?"

FEEDBACK SHAPES DREAMS

As children get older, they experience more and more in the real world. They get feedback about their competencies and skills (and challenges) in the real world. This feedback eventually begins to shape the dreams. Dreams that are reinforced with successful experiences in the world (classroom, playground, stage, neighborhood...) become more directed. Dreams that are not confirmed by life experiences may lose their luster. They can become boring. A child who dreams of being a professional singer is confirmed by positive experiences in the choir; a child who dreams of being an Olympic track star is confirmed by winning the races on the playground; a child who dreams of being a doctor is confirmed by academic successes; a child who dreams of being a teacher is confirmed by his/her relationships with peers and models. On the other hand, a slow runner's dream of athletic success is diminished, a poor reader's dream of writing the great American novel is lost, a budding actor who cannot remember his/her lines loses focus, and so forth. Adults need to support their children dreaming, but they also need to be realistic when they watch for their children's motivations, skills, and aptitudes so these attributes also can be supported.

A major problem is when parents project their dreams onto their children, noticing, emphasizing, and supporting the attributes in their children that would help with such dreams. Such parents support the skills (such as math) whether or not the child is interested, motivated, or fulfilled by them (not interested in being a scientist, for example). A family I worked with had such a problem. The parents were adamant that their son achieve their goal for him to go to college and become a professional, despite years of indifferent academic performances late into high school. School was boring. Feedback from school was that he was a dumb kid. Feedback from his parents was that he was a bad kid. On the other hand, fortunately, he did find something that he loved that wasn't self-destructive. He was passionate about automobile stereo and security system electronics. And he was good at it. He loved reading about the latest advancements in auto electronics, and had real skills in designing and installing them. He got a job at an auto electronics store where he did very well and was appreciated. The feedback he got here was positive. His dream was to own his own business that installed the best premium sound systems for luxury cars. Because his parents remained focused on their dreams for him, they ignored or put down his skills and successes. They put down his dream even though it was a realistic, tangible, and motivating dream for him because it wasn't their dream. Until the parents could accept his dream (accept who he was, which included accepting what he wasn't), the family remained in pain, and the son felt disrespected.

When children get bored (momentarily), they will do something to entertain themselves. Sometimes, that something may be beneficial. They may find their passion (for the moment, and even perhaps for life). Directing their "boredom" with clear healthy alternatives and options helps a great deal. The boredom actually can be motivating for the search for dreams that will promote growth. When they are older, whether or not they have dreams plays a large part in how they handle the boredom and life choices. They will restrain themselves from poor choices if they have



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a greater vision they are striving towards. Moving a child from being dependent on adults' discipline to self-discipline is easier when a child finds a purpose in life.



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Chapter 5

ANGER DISTRACTING IN COMMUNICATION & DISCIPLINE

What? You did what!?

Dad is mad.

!@#\$\$%^&*

Dad is really mad. Dad is really really mad.

How many times do I need to tell you!?

Dad is scary.

What IS WRONG with you?

Dad is really scary. Dad is really really scary.

!@#\$\$%^&*

I'm scared. I'm really scared. I'm really really scared.

Say "I'm sorry" Say "I'm really sorry, I'm really really sorry."

I DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW.....

Say something... say anything. Anything so he won't be mad at me.

Say "I won't do it anymore." Say it again... and again.

Say anything that would get him away from me...

I... am... really... disappointed...

Boy, he was really mad... really really mad!

Okay ... I hope you understand.

Whew! He's calming down. I'm glad that's over!

Don't you ever do that again!

Hmmm? What did he say? Can I do it anyway? Or what?

When we speak to children, oftentimes what we intend to say comes out poorly or inappropriately. In other words, our intentions get confused and children have confusion and difficulty figuring out how to deal with us. Sometimes, this is because we are frustrated and confused ourselves. Often the confusion needs to anger. Getting clear about what is important to ourselves, what is important for us to communicate to children – to clearly and concretely understand the values that we hold is very important. When we are not clear, yet we still communicate to children and as a consequence, confuse them and ourselves. Clear and effective communication starts with clarity within you. And, clarity within oneself starts with clarity about your family experiences. Just why do you end up saying exactly what your parents said to you... end up saying exactly what you swore you'd never say to your own children!?

OUT OF THE MURK

A couple that I worked with had trouble finding clarity in their family. This was expressed in their communication and dynamics with each other and in their parenting styles. It took significant work to understand the models of communication and parenting that they each came from before they could be effective in parenting their children. The father came from a family where communication was always very loud and very angry. A parent communicating with any intensity meant that you were in trouble and that you would be soon emotionally abused or humiliated. This made it difficult for him to hear any loud or upset communication whether or not it was addressed at him. That it was loud automatically implied that it was going to be dangerous. As a result, with his wife and with his children, he censored himself when he was



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angry. In addition, he also would be upset at his wife if she raised her voice. In addition, he stifled the children's honest emotional expression if it came from anger or frustration. Despite his sanctions against being angry, the realities of being in a family and being in a relationship made it so he was angry at times (like it's even remotely possible to be in intimate relationships without sometimes getting frustrated and angry at the others in the relationship!). He would then feel ashamed -- fearing that he had or would express himself in the negative ways that the parents had done when he was a child. Inevitably, the pent-up and unexpressed anger would seep out or even explode at some later time causing even greater damage and problems in the family. He remembered that anger as his childhood family anger and it had terrified him. And, he was terrified that he was repeating it... or, that his wife was repeating it. To him, anger equaled abuse, which equaled pain, and therefore anger equals pain.

In her family, very little was said out loud. There was a false harmony- a pseudo-peace in the family as most communication was done nonverbally. They maintained a myth that there were no "fights" in this family. However, a dirty look, rolling eyes, a smirk, a sigh of disgust, a shift in body posture, a slight change in tone, something that was not said, or a simple action... all these were common and powerful communications of approval and disapproval that sanctioned everyone in the family. Everyone in the family eventually learned the meaning of the implicit messages of these nonverbal communications. In fact, there was an underlying binding rule that you did not to ever express anything out loud if it was potentially upsetting. As is often the case, while everyone in the family is painfully in tune to the family communication style and rules, people from outside the family often do not clearly interpret these secret messages, approvals, and/or disapprovals. Someone who grows up in such a family often expects another person (especially a romantic partner) to intuit the meaning of the nonverbal communication, and is then often deeply disappointed (devastated) that they do not do it correctly. The rule or assumption is (as it was understood in the family of origin) that "if you really care... if you really love me, then you would know/intuit what I mean... what I need, and automatically respond appropriately. And, if you don't respond appropriately, then you don't care... then you don't love me... you dirty dog!" Over and over in the relationship, the wife would be deeply hurt as her husband "failed" to interpret her subtle nonverbal communications and respond appropriately. Even then as she was hurt, she did not overtly communicate her distress or what had caused it. It was not part of the family style. Instead, she sent even more nonverbal communications for him about her distress, which since he was not from her family and thus unfamiliar with the communication style, he would miss again... thus injuring her again.

When the two of them brought the family communication styles and rules into their new family, they did so without being fully aware of their styles and rules and also, without negotiating a new overt style and set of rules for the family. Their children were then burdened with interpreting two distinct communication styles. This, of course confused them a great deal when they were young. However, most children when they are older have figured out the discrepancy between their parents' competing communication styles, and can describe them fairly clearly. When I asked their children in family therapy, the parents were very surprised at how accurately their children had figured them out. While the children recognized the differences, they also found them burdensome and they definitely didn't like them. Each parent was living out his or her family of origin communication style (and dysfunction) without awareness, while their children could only react to them. When each parent was able to understand how his/her communication style had developed from their family experiences, only then were they able to examine whether



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

or not either style was appropriate, or effective, or worth perpetuating. Only then, could they overtly negotiate a new and effective communication and parenting style that would be effective in their new family.

"USUALLY..." VERSUS UNDER STRESS

Many people are unaware of how they function under stress. They see themselves, and hold themselves to be kind and reasonable people. They can live up to these values without difficulty when things are going well. Unfortunately, health and success in the world, in life, and in relationships is not based on how well you handle yourself when everything is going well. The true test is how well you handle stress. Can you still be a person you need to be... the person your children need you to be even under stress... even under tremendous stress? I'm reminded of a conversation I had with a group of directors of childcare programs (I was a director at that time as well). One of the directors was talking about an unexpected scary situation at her school -- they had received a report that someone was loose in the neighborhood with a gun. Their playground was adjacent to the street, separated only by a cyclone fence. There were three dozen children and four teachers in the yard at the time. Three of the teachers quickly began gathering the children and sending them inside. The fourth teacher panicked and ran inside without helping with the children. Of course, all of us were appalled that she had abandoned the children. To her defense, the director said "She was usually a very good teacher." I am certain that she was usually a very good teacher -- that she was generally very reliable... when there was no stress and no crisis. Unfortunately, it is at the point of crisis... it is when there is the greatest danger, that she is needed the most. Under stress, she failed in her most fundamental role of protecting the children. Most adults can be good parents... **are** good parents when they are not under stress. However, bills are real, time is short, work can be demanding, relationships are difficult... and you get to pay taxes too! Unfortunately, being a parent is largely about being under stress! (What!? Not just fun and games!?). How do you respond under stress?

Some people feel that the best way to deal with stress is to remove or to avoid stress. That is impractical and impossible! It is possible to reduce stress; however stress is a part of life... it certainly is a part of parenting! Sometimes people deny stress and in doing so, load up on it only to explode later on... at family or somewhere else. By being aware of how you function under stress of, you can begin to improve on how you deal with stress. Again, this often takes you back to your family of origin. It is in the family of origin that you begin to learn how to deal with stress, specifically how to deal with the stress of a being in that family... or neighborhood... or classroom or school. Often, the survival mechanisms of childhood are carried forward into adulthood without any evolution or examination, whether or not they are necessary or appropriate vs. unnecessary and damaging to current survival. The father described above, carried forth his denial and avoidance of expressing anger -- a basic survival mechanism from his family into his new relationship and new family even though it was unnecessary and actually dangerous and damaging to everyone. When he became aware that his own feelings of anger and his own experiences of other people's anger triggered him in this manner, he could begin to plan alternatives and attempt to adjust how to respond to stress and triggers.

THE MURK MONSTER EMERGES AND ANGER OVERWHELMS!

Sometimes the communication that comes out of a parent is primarily that he or she is angry. And that it is the child's fault. And that the child must do something so that the parent is no longer angry. The anger that occurs comes out of the frustration normally within the parents. It



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may come from having held the anger or having held the frustration over a long period of time. Anger can become counterproductive to the effectiveness of the discipline (or can be supportive-more later on this). This is a functional perspective- not a moral perspective about anger. What does anger contribute to the effectiveness of discipline? Discipline is about teaching a child the important lessons of life. Lessons need to be learned about what is appropriate behavior and inappropriate behavior, how to understand and interpret people, how one's actions have consequences upon other people and upon one's own future, and so forth. While the anger in a parent when a child has messed up may be normal and appropriate, when it is too intense it will defeat the learning -- the acquisition of discipline that is intended. When the anger is too intense it becomes terrifying to a child. If nothing else, when the anger is too intense, it draws virtually the entire attention of the child to the anger -- and away from the lessons that are intended to be taught.

Whatever the lessons that was intended to be taught to... whatever you want the child to learn... the opportunity to teach... all are loss as the child's focus is drawn to the anger and to avoiding the anger. The discussion of whether or not is appropriate to express anger at your child (I believe it is appropriate, if you are aware, sensitive and responsive to how it is affecting them. Being angry is human... as if anyone can actually not express anger when angry!) is useful as it focuses on the potential abuse or harm it can cause to children. However, anger can also cause harm to the effectiveness of discipline. Instead of learning a discipline lesson, the child learns to never get or allow his or her parents to get mad. Or, the child learns that is his or her fault that the adult is angry. Or, that the child must subjugate his or her own needs to keep the parent happy or pleased, or risk the rage of his or her parents. Or, that the child learns that he or she is helpless in his or her terror facing the rage of his or her parent. Or, the child learns that his or her parent hates him/her. Expressing one's needs would be experienced as being defiant and very dangerous provoking of the parent.

“ACCENTING” THE DISCIPLINE

On the other hand, anger can be an appropriate accent -- emphasis added to the point, to the lesson being taught so that the child can recognize the importance of the lesson, and hopefully take it more to heart. As some parents do this anger “accented” emphasis intuitively, some of them will condemn themselves and are terrified that they are damaging their children. Ironically, these are often the sweetest and kindest, most nurturing and sensitive parents. To them (and to you), I remind them to take a close look at their children and ask themselves, "Do your children looked like traumatized children?" "Are they scared of you? Or, are they uncomfortable when you are angry? Does it take a long time for them to recover? Or a short time? Do they learn a lesson -- get the discipline?" If the answers indicate a stable, secure, and positive relationship, how you are handling it is probably fine. There has been more than a few times when I had doubted myself or been upset with myself for losing my temper with my children. Each time, I would despair that I might have scared or damaged my children. Inevitably, they rebound from the incident immediately and without trauma. I was the one with trauma worrying about them! To them, it was just Dad being mad! ...about this particular thing ...and for this short period. And, the rest of the time, everything is loving and caring. And, behavior changes for the positive. If, on the other hand, you are ineffective... if they are not learning the lesson... if they don't get the discipline AND you have a secure nurturing relationship, then it might be necessary to "accent", that is, emphasize the urgency of your communication with a little bit more overt and obvious anger!



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Chapter 6

YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN!

What Is Said

Are you sure?
Slow down, watch out.
You know better than that!
Behave!
What are you doing?
This really is a good one.
What did I say?
Well, that's what I think.
You do this all the time.
(sigh)

Translation (What Is Meant)

I don't like your choice.
I'm scared you might get hurt
I'm disgusted with you!
Don't embarrass me.
Stop it!
Choose this one.
I'm disappointed in you.
You're about to get into **BIG** trouble!
Agree or be damned!
I am disappointed, disgusted, and hurt.

What you say is often not what you mean. In addition, it is often not what is understood by your child or other person you are talking to. Every communication contains both the explicit message and the implicit message. Children are very intuitive about recognizing what the "real" message is (whether or not the adult recognizes or admits what his/her own "real" message is!). Sometimes, adults claim to present a reasonable and fair message, but actually are expressing frustration, disappointment, and anger quite clearly with their implicit message. When I work with couples in therapy, they often have disagreements about what was meant in an earlier discussion or argument. Normally, the verbal communication was relatively straightforward. However the nonverbal communication was open to interpretation. Often times, the interpretation would be highly negative. Relatively simple comments would be interpreted like negatively. For example, the question, "Did you take out the garbage?" is interpreted as an accusation, "You never take out the garbage. You don't follow through. I'm tired of asking you. You don't do your share..." Or, "You're doubting me. You're trying to control me. You're pushing me. You think I'm unreliable..." (I actually had a couple spend half a session arguing about taking out the garbage! They were unable to explicitly communicate with each other, but attacked each other implicitly around the garbage!). Sometimes, the interpretation of the implicit messages is absolutely correct!

Implicit messages become a sneaky way to attack or criticize the other person while claiming to be reasonable and innocent. This inherent dishonesty complicates the relationship between any two people. An adult is more likely to challenge the discrepancy between the overt message and the covert message. He or she will note the difference between the verbal message and the nonverbal message -- the tone, the facial expression or body language, and action or lack of action. For example, the truth of the verbal statement "I'm listening" will be negated by nonverbal communication if spoken in a harsh cold tone, or accompanied by a frown, or with arms folded across the chest, or is spoken while reading a newspaper. Young children, on the other hand, can be confused by the discrepancy between the verbal and non-verbal messages. Or, when they are older and more sophisticated (as sophisticated as teens can be!), they recognize the discrepancy and may ascribe it to a fundamental dishonesty of particular or all adults. They then may distrust everything those particular or all adults say.



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It is important to be honest with yourself about how you feel and what you want to communicate. There are many times in frustration and anger that we may want to lash out, but inhibit ourselves from doing so. This is often quite appropriate. Lashing out can often cause great harm. However, it is normal to be frustrated and angry, and important to acknowledge and accept the reality of the feelings. If you do not accept your own humanity, you will attempt to deceive yourself and others in your communication- "I am **not** angry!!" Unfortunately, when you do this, you often present a mismatched communication, where the verbal is contradicted by the nonverbal. Children usually are accepting of the communication from adults as being straightforward and consistent. However, they are also very intuitive regarding the nonverbal communications. They will get the verbal communication and be confused that the nonverbal communications does not match. If the adult denies the dishonesty in the communication, then the child will be even further confused. The child will begin to doubt his/her own ability to correctly interpret the world. This will create insecurity not only about his/her relationship with the adult, but also about his/her safety in the world at-large.

I TOLD YOU THAT!

Do not say, "You need to cooperate," when you mean, "Do what I say." Do not say, "You need to share," when you really mean, "Stop arguing." Do not say, "Be good," when your deeper fear and command is, "Don't embarrass me." Such deeper messages may be difficult to comply with, but they are even more difficult when they are not clearly presented and are obscured by the explicit verbal message. In addition, some of these covert messages are impossible for a child to comply with. If the embarrassment fear comes from the adult's childhood stresses and traumas and has become an ingrained sense of shame, then "Don't embarrass me," becomes far too deep and complex a command for a child to handle. That would make the child feel incompetent or inadequate. Other communications can be even more directly harmful. The statement, "I told you that!" can be particularly dangerous. That statement is not merely a reminder of earlier commands or even of current frustration. It clearly implies that there is something very wrong about the child because he/she did not remember. The child will be consumed with guilt that he/she failed at what he/she should have remembered. As opposed to having been very human... very much a child and had been distracted or had forgotten what was not particularly an urgency with him/her.

When a parent is very upset (anxious, fearful, worried), the upset often becomes anger. This can be especially true for men. One of the consequences of male cultural training is the tendency for boys and men to be very uncomfortable with their more vulnerable emotions. As boys and men were trained to be warriors, their vulnerable and gentle feelings (sadness, loss, distress, anxiety, fear, and such) were discouraged as unsuitable and even hazardous to the demands of warfare. This training continues today to a large degree, as boys are trained (and shamed) to deny and avoid such feelings as not masculine and weak. As these aspects of their humanity are denied, the emotional energy is often diverted to (even encouraged to express as) anger. Unfortunately, this means that when some boys and men feel any of these vulnerable feelings, they quickly jump away from them and express and act out with anger. Domestic violence can be seen as a direct consequence of some men's inability to handle the emotional challenges of intimacy- to be sad, disappointed, distressed, anxious, or hurt in a relationship without descending into anger and the violence that it may precipitate. While men may be particularly culturally vulnerable to this distress or upset to anger dynamic, many women are also so inclined from the experiences of their lives.



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FROM “DON’T” TO “DO”

As discussed in the previous article, intense anger can be very distracting from the point of discipline- teaching appropriate behavior. Interpreting the intended or desirable (not the same thing) message often becomes difficult for children. Or, a message may be incompletely understood. For example when you give, a "Don't..." command to a child, do you also give "Do..." options? "Don't run inside" clearly defines what your child should not or cannot do- run inside. However it does not tell him/her what **to do**. It does not give any guidance or suggestion as to what he/she is to do with his/her physical energy and need to be active. What is the opposite of "Don't run inside?" Many people will answer, "walk inside." However "walk inside" while it helps manage household safety and lessons the likelihood of unexpected crashes and destruction and helps with your peace of mind, it does nothing for the high energy within the child seeking expression. "Go outside and run around," "Put on some music so you can dance," or "Let's take a walk," are ways to complete the "don't" command with "do" options.

Very often, parents are quite adept at telling a child what NOT to do- things the child shouldn't do because they are dangerous, or messy, or inconvenient. However, what can result is a kid with pent-up energy and no way to express it. He/she become like a hot water kettle under heat that needs to let off steam, but has it's spout stopped up. And, like such a kettle, the child is also likely to explode dangerously. Unlike a kettle, a child can keep it all inside if parents are demanding and harsh. However, the pent-up energy will cause internal harm- emotional and psychological harm. It is important to train yourself to use affirmative phrases when disciplining children. "Stop it," tells the child to terminate activity that is immediately satisfying. "Finish it later," tells the child to delay the satisfaction of being active and involved in the moment. Both need to be counter-balanced with "Do this other rewarding and energy satisfying activity (which is more suited to indoor activity, the occasion, the circumstances, and so forth) instead." When I was the owner and director (and head teacher) of my own preschool program, I spent considerable energy and was largely able to train myself to balance each "no" and "don't" with a "yes, do this instead." The result was a far more positive atmosphere in the program; children whose energy was more respected and who learn more productive ways to express such energy; and a greater serenity on my part as I felt more positive and less of a negative and punitive enforcer. And it wasn't easy! It took me quite a while and a lot of energy to be able to be positive consistently with the preschool children- and of course, I would still lapse sometimes! A definite additional benefit was that when there was an urgency- a need to say "no", the children would respond more quickly and completely to a strong "no" from me since they didn't get "no's" from me all day long. Repeated telling children "no" and "don't..." leads children to ignore or minimize such commands more readily.

HOW MANY TIMES DO I NEED TO TELL YOU THAT?

Adults often have learned to communicate using rhetorical questions. The problem with rhetorical questions is that they are normally statements spoken in the form of questions. This often confuses young children. Once when we took our small preschool of 30 children out a walking field trip in out neighborhood. There was a wide and busy street (two lanes each way for a total of 4 lanes) that we wanted to cross. When the red light turned to green, we started to cross- a long line of fifteen pairs of children holding hands with one teacher in front, one in the back, and two in the middle. As you can imagine, the children were not the most efficient hustling across the street. The light turned to yellow while the end of the line of children was still in the middle of the street. As usual, some of the children were distracted by the cars, the people, the stores, and whatever else they could see, and were walking very slowly. One of the teachers got a bit flustered with the



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imminent red light, and said to the kids, “What do you think you’re doing?” You or I as adults would recognize the rhetorical question as a complaint, “I don’t like what you are doing (walking slowly).” And, a command, “I want you to do change what you are doing (walk faster).” Unfortunately, the children did not understand it that way. They did understand that they had been asked a question, and that when adults ask questions, children are expected to give an answer. So, several of the children (who can have difficulty doing more than one thing at a time), **stopped** in the middle of the street as they thought, “What **am** I doing? Must be a trick question because I thought I was walking across the street... like the teacher wanted... but maybe she doesn’t want me to walk across the street, because I can tell by her tone and face that’s she’s upset... maybe mad at me. What did I do wrong? What am I doing wrong? **What am I doing?**” And then, the teacher became even more flustered as part of the line of children stalled out in the middle of the street! And more upset with the children... upset because they were not cognitively and socially sophisticated enough to understand rhetorical questions. It was confusing for the children because they did understand that the teacher was upset with them but they did not know what for.

Any attempt to answer rhetorical questions becomes automatically an admission to the truth or relevance of the implicit statement underlying it. The frustration question, “How many times do I need to tell you that?” may not only be confusing to a child, but it can also be a particularly dangerous rhetorical question. The implicit statement is that “I have told you many times before, and yet you still don’t understand or obey. Therefore, you must be extremely stupid, that you still don’t understand or obey. Or, are being purposely defiant because you are such a bad child!” If the child attempts to answer the question, he/she admits to being either stupid or bad. Don’t trap your children with rhetorical questions. Be aware of your frustration and other emotions so that they don’t come out in ways that harm your children’s emotional well being. Your communication can be clearer and cleaner when you’re self-aware- you can say what you mean, and your children will receive communication as it is intended and be able to respond more appropriately. In discipline communication, this is even more critical because you are shaping your child’s current and future successes or failures with social interactions and relationships.



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Chapter 7

MORAL DEVELOPMENT- WHEN WINNING MEANS LOSING

A woman was near death from cancer. A druggist had discovered a drug that could save her. The druggist was charging \$2000 for a small dose of the drug- 10 times what it cost him to make. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, borrowed as much as he could, but could get together only about \$1000. He told the druggist that his wife was dying, and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "No. I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." Heinz, desperate, broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife. Should Heinz have done that? Why or why not? (Lawrence Kohlberg, 1969).

No, Heinz will get into trouble. The druggist isn't bad. He has a right to make money.

Yes, it's okay. It's not worth that much money. His wife needs it. He has to steal it to save her.

No, stealing is bad. And it's not his fault the druggist is greedy. But it's still wrong.

Yes, it's what he has to do as a good husband. He can't let his wife die. He's responsible.

No, although you can't blame him, you can't have people defying the law when they preserve the life of his wife has greater moral feel justified- consider the community values. justification than the rule not to steal.

Yes, it isn't right, but it is justified. To

People constantly face choices in their lives. As they make choices, the consequences of their choices determine the principles around which they follow throughout their lives. Power and control are among the motivations that determine such choices. Children constantly try to get more power and control in their lives (and more candy, and more toys, and more TV time, and more and more!). Adults continue this struggle with employment, education, housing, luxuries, and so forth. When the drive for power and control becomes the overwhelming driving force for anyone, then other issues including morality, social responsibility, others' well being, and the community welfare can be lost. There are times when adults must not allow a child to "win" a power struggle (and many times, when a child should be allowed to win- another article at another time). Sometimes a child will try to prevail around some issue or circumstance because of short-term gratuitous motivations that may have significant harmful long-term consequences: gaining an extra cookie that leads to an upset stomach... or a loss of appetite for the healthy meal... or poor lifelong eating habits... or eventual nutritional and health problems; or a delay in going to bed to watch more television that leads to difficulty waking up the next morning... or poor concentration in class... or moodiness that harms relationships with peers... or an enduring habit of intimidation to force his/her will upon others... or an irresponsible sense of entitlement. The potential for negative learning, the development of harmful habits, and of dysfunctional processes to deal with life and relationships becomes high if children "win" such negative power struggles. Adults need to provide the discipline- the boundaries and consequences to shape children into becoming healthy individually sound and socially responsible people.

FUNCTIONAL MORALITY

Children are extremely practical. They have a functional logic- a functional morality. "If it works, then it's good... if it doesn't work, then it's bad." Or, "if I can get away with it, then it's good... if



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"I can't get away with it, then it's bad." Unfortunately, that sounds like a lot of adults as well. It becomes vital to make sure (with proper discipline) that poor choices do not "work"- that is, they are not rewarded for the poor choices; and that positive choices "work"- that is, they are rewarded for the positive choice. Do not let the children "win" when they make poor choices. If they "win" this way, they will lose. Be sure to have them "win" when they make positive choices. If they "win" this way, they will win in life. This simple functional morality needs to be understood, "accepted," and then used to move them toward more sophisticated and higher morality. Adults will often try to teach higher and more advanced forms of morality to young children whether or not they are developmentally (cognitively, emotionally, psychologically, or socially) ready to understand. While the children often can respond verbatim with the correct answers to moral dilemmas as presented by adults, when faced with actual choices, they are driven by morality that is largely determined by their developmental stage. This also means that children can make the "right" (correct) choices that adults want them to make, but often for the "wrong" (incorrect) reasons. The choices often come from a functional morality rather than from internalizing the principles and values of adults such as parents or teachers. If not approached developmentally, but instead with rigidity and demands for compliance, children will stay in functional morality into adulthood and be removed from the higher morality of autonomous individuals who are socially and community conscious adults. Recognizing and accepting the simple morality of young children allows adults to more successfully move them forward to higher more authentic morality. In other words, you cannot simply make a child into a moral person with demands and harshness. If you attempt this, they become vulnerable to responding rigidly and without any evaluative skills of their own. You see children who are paralyzed... who are unable make even simple choices, because they need definition from authority figures as to what the "right" choice is. There are many adults who do not have enough ego strength and require someone else (a political figure, a religious leader, a guru, a psychic, or other authoritative and charismatic personality) to tell them what life choices to make. Uncertainty becomes certain only "because Mommy says it's ok." Eventually, it can become "Because such and such leader says it's ok."

Yet this certainty often remains only words rather than expressed in subsequent behavior. How many times has you seen a child (your child, perhaps!) spout the morality of the family or classroom (or of the Christmas "naughty or nice" doctrine) and then turn around immediately to sneak an extra cookie, push to grab, or tell Santa how well behaved he/she has been because he/she thinks he/she can get away with it!? Or, of a child gravely committing to the rules of the home or of the circumstance (not to beg for a toy or treat during a visit to the store, for example), and then seize the moment to violate his/her commitment, because he/she knows he/she can get the toy or treat? How terribly similar to the numerous community, government, business, military, and even religious leaders who too often chose selfish gratification over their most fundamental moral commitments to serve their peoples, charges, and societies. There have been many in positions of power and influence who have transgressed with impunity because they could get away with it. Because it was possible and they felt they would go unpunished, they indulged in temptations of money, sexual improprieties, power, property, and crimes against people and institutions. Yet, they then still claim to be "nice" rather than admit to having been "naughty!" To claim to have been righteous despite destroying the lives and livelihoods of thousands and corrupting the integrity of organizations and companies. And, refuse to take responsibility and blame others instead. "Uh uh! I didn't do it. He did it! I'm a good boy!" Sometimes, the denial of complicity works, and children (or adults) get away with the mischievous and even the reprehensible. And



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learns both that they can get away with the morally improper behavior... and that denial and lying works as well. Unaddressed, this methodology carries into adulthood in the most horrible ways.

LEVELS OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Lawrence Kohlberg presented a very useful theory of moral development that is based on both cognitive development and interaction with the world. It is important to note that these are principles rather than rigid standards. The ages should be viewed as age ranges rather than absolutes. He broke moral development into three levels each with two stages:

Level I: Preconventional Morality (ages 4-10). The emphasis in this level is on external control. The standards are those of others, and they are observed either to avoid punishment or to reap rewards.

- Stage 1: Orientation toward punishment and obedience. “What will happen to me?” Children obey rules of others to avoid punishment. They ignore the motives of an act and focus on its physical form (such as the size of a lie) or its consequences (for example, the amount of physical damage).
- Stage 2: Instrumental purpose and exchange. “You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.” Children conform to rules out of self-interest and consideration for what others can do for them in return. They look at an act in terms of the human needs it meets and differentiate this value from the act’s physical form and consequences.

Level II: Morality of Conventional Role Conformity (ages 10-13). Children now want to please other people. They still observe the standards of others, but they have internalized these standards to some extent. Now they want to be considered “good” by those persons whose opinions are important to them. They are now able to take the roles of authority figures well enough to decide whether an action is good by their standards.

- Stage 3: Maintaining mutual relations, approval of others, the golden rule. Am I a good boy or girl?” Children want to please and help others, can judge the intentions of others, and develop their own ideas of what a good person is. They evaluate an act according to the motive behind it or the person performing it, and they take circumstances into account.
- Stage 4: Social concern and conscience. “What if everybody did it?” People are concerned with doing their duty, showing respect for higher authority, and maintaining the social order. They consider an act always wrong, regardless of motive or circumstances, if it violates a rule and harms others.

Level III: Morality of Autonomous Moral Principles (ages 13, or not until young adulthood, or never). This level marks the attainment of true morality. For the first time, the person acknowledges the possibility of conflict between two socially accepted standards and tries to decide between them. The control of conduct is not internal, both in the standards observed and in the reasoning about right and wrong. Stages 5 and 6 may be alternative methods of the highest level or moral reasoning.

- Stage 5: Morality of contract, of individual rights, and of democratically accepted law. People think in rational terms, valuing the will of the majority and the welfare of society. They generally see these values best supported by adherence to the law. While they recognize that there are times when human need and the law conflict, they believe that it is better for society in the long run if they obey the law.



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

- Stage 6: Morality of universal ethical principles. People do what they as individuals think right, regardless of legal restrictions or the opinions of others. They act in accordance with internalized standards, knowing that they could condemn themselves if they did not. (adapted from Kohlberg, 1969, 1976).

Adults are often drawn to the highest levels of morality as expressed in Level 3, Stages 5 and 6, and wish to instill such values in their children. However, children cannot jump ahead to these levels without successfully going through the earlier stages. As with all developmental theories, the rules of sequence, progression, and the requirement for satiation of each developmental stage hold true. Attempting to skip or rush through stages will inevitably cause one to be pulled back to that stage again. Stress, trauma, or abuse will cause people to regress back to or cause people to get stuck at earlier stages. Moral development can also get stuck at earlier stages, or people can regress to earlier less autonomous moral stages- Level 1 morality.

TEACHING “HIGHER” AND “LOWER” MORALITY

If your child functions at a “lower” moral level, consider your child’s age. If his/her moral reasoning matches up with his/her developmental level, then the extent of your concern need not be as great. Verbalize and teach the “higher” moral principles but do not expect children to necessarily internalize such principles. In addition to verbalizing the “higher” moral principles, be sure to set expectations, boundaries, and consequences that are appropriate to their developmental stage. For example, it can be appropriate for you explain that they should not lie about doing their homework because of how it harms the trust between you and them- a sacred relationship, of how a person’s word is the foundation to his/her self-respect and affects his/her self-esteem and reputation in the community, and how you want them to live up to high moral standards so they can have lives of integrity and fulfillment (Level 3: Stages 5 & 6 morality). However (as they look at you with open mouths, wondering, “What is s/he talking about!?”), you also need express and discipline in the “lower” moral language. Direct them toward how such behavior if common (“What if everybody did it?”) harms communities (families, classrooms, workplace, etc.), how it causes people see them negatively and harm their reputation (“Not what a good kid does”) (Level 2: Stages 3 & 4); and how it will cause others to do bad things back to them (“Do you want people to lie to you?”), and that they will suffer negative consequences if they lie (“And, you will be on timeout for lying and won’t get to play”) (Level 1: Stages 1 & 2).

The foundation of the higher levels of morality is in the first level. It cannot be skipped. And, it also needs to be surpassed for children to lead moral lives in adulthood. It may be frustrating when you expect your child (and he/she is old enough) to function at higher levels of morality and he/she functions at a lower level (avoidance of punishment, for example). The recovery process to help your child to more appropriate morality can be complex, but regardless, the foundation is to reassert the Preconventional Morality principles and consequences in disciplining him/her. If you waver and let him/her “win” inappropriately, none of the higher principles will ever be accepted or internalized.



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Chapter 8

DUCKS AND OPEN OR CLOSED COMMUNICATION

At my preschool and daycare program, we used to have all kinds of animals. In the backyard, we kept a duck that roamed around most of the time. One day, the children found a duck egg in the bushes! This brought about a frenzied search throughout the yard for more eggs. The duck had been very busy- there were more than a dozen eggs! The kids came inside to tell me about their discoveries, "The duck laid eggs... the duck laid eggs!" Bright eyed and flushed with excitement, little four year old Tammy asked THE QUESTION, "Are we going to have baby ducks!?" Oh oh... the birds and the bees sex education question! Or the ducks and the eggs question!

Wanting to give a good answer, I said, "Well, no Tammy... we're not going to have baby ducks. You see our duck, Uggy could be the mommy duck, but there can't be any baby ducks unless there's a daddy duck too. Because the mommy duck has the eggs but the daddy duck has to give the mommy duck a little thing... uh... called a sperm, like a seed to make the egg grow to be a baby duck. And, we don't have a daddy duck, just a mommy duck. So Uggy can lay eggs but the eggs won't have baby ducks." Not bad, huh? And, I could have stopped there... but Noooo, I had to continue because I am an educator!

*"You see, like you Tammy. When you're older, you will have eggs in your body all the time too... but you won't lay eggs! They'll be inside you. But you won't have babies grow all the time! You can't have a baby grow from your egg unless there's a daddy (someone very special, we hope) to give you the sperm to make the egg grow." I was rolling! Clear... honest... developmentally appropriate... what an educator! That college education was showing! Tammy stared at me with a deep serious look. Then her face broke into a big smile, and with a gleam in her eyes she said teasingly, "Silly man! I'm **not** a duck!"*

Sometimes we are so interested in seizing a teachable moment, that we teach what children are not interested in, or teach beyond their capacity to understand. "No Tammy, we're not going to have any baby ducks! There has to be a daddy duck too," would have been enough... maybe just a "no" would have been enough. However, discipline is very much about education. You just have to be clear about what the children are learning versus what you are trying to teach. Good communications are key to good education and good discipline. Good communications convey validation that the other person is valued, and connection between the speaker and the other person. The communication is more than the words spoken. As I mentioned before, it includes gestures, body language, facial expressions, voice tone, touch, action and the lack of action. When the non-verbal does not match up with the verbal, for example, you say "I'll be there in a minute," but don't show up as you are distracted, the lack of action communicates that the other person does not count (is invalidating) and is not connected.

Communications oriented relationship building is based on the theory that poor communication and misunderstandings create a loss of self-esteem and, thus are the basis of dysfunctional relationships. Better and improved skills in giving and receiving communication become the key to giving and gaining self-esteem, improving relationships and facilitating healthy strong children. Members of a family must learn how to identify the implicit aspects of communication within the family- the covert communication. These are the messages that are sensed, assessed, and responded to



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consciously and subconsciously in addition to the overt communication (the words spoken). Children make guesses at what may be the underlying communication. Tammy, in the above situation, since she did not understand my well intended but confusing over-explanations and comparisons, made a guess that I was joking- teasing her. In this case, it was a benign misinterpretation. However, there are often situations where the misinterpretation can be harmful. For example, if I had found the question about baby ducks uncomfortable, any answer I may have given could have been tainted with my anxiety about a sex education question. My anxiety could have inadvertently communicated to the kids that I was upset with them for bringing up such a question. That they were “bad” to ask such questions. They may then refrain from asking such questions again. In addition, what they interpret and “learn” from their families becomes transferred to their interactions with other people in other circumstances: another family, at school, with grandparents, and so forth. Such assumptions can be very problematic if they do not match up well with the expectations of new group. For example, if a child is told that he/she is to try harder and the implicit message through tone, facial expressions, and body posture is of anger and disappointment, then when he/she is urged by his/her teacher to try harder on a project, the child may interpret the encouragement as criticism from a disappointed upset adult. Recently, a major supermarket chain, began requiring its staff to constantly smile and greet their customers with a “How are you?” and/or “Could I help you?” The intention was create a friendlier customer-pleasing atmosphere in the supermarkets. Unfortunately, some customers misinterpreted the implicit message. Many of the female supermarket employees became unhappy with the results of their smiles and greetings, as various male customers responded with sexualized overtures as they interpreted their courtesies as flirting!

OPEN VS. CLOSED COMMUNICATION

Certain communication styles close off communication, while others keep communication open between and among members of the family, classroom, group, or other system. Rhetorical questions that come out of frustration can close off communication. “How stupid do you think I am!?” pretty much traps the child. “About this stupid... not too stupid” obviously won’t, but even saying “I don’t think you’re stupid” would only bring the retort, “So why do you act like I’m stupid?” Any reply implies agreement with the stupidity accusation. And a denial would also provoke more anger. It is important to identify closed communication styles versus open styles. Here are eight examples of conversation or communication stoppers.

INTERRUPTING

Earl: I got a new dog! He’s so smart. He...

Glen: Joe got a new cat.

Earl: Really? When?

Glen: Yesterday.

Earl: Well, my dog is really a puppy. He...

Glen: Joe’s cat is full-grown.

Earl: Oh, how come he didn’t get a kitten?

Glen: I dunno. Her cat is real fluffy with brown and orange spots. It’s real friendly. It has a real loud purr.

Earl: Oh. My puppy...

Glen: I don’t want to toilet train a puppy. That’s why we don’t have one. Cats are easier.

Earl: Oh.



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When a person is trying to express him/herself, the communication becomes the flow of his/her expression... actually of his/her essence. Interrupting has the effect of stopping or of denying that flow of energy. It has the effect of denying the person's right to express- essentially the right to exist.

PROBING

Dani: Hi, guess what?

Judy: What?

Dani: Remember my friend who you met at the Valentines Day party?

Judy: Yeah, I think. His name Juan?

Dani: Yeah, Juan.

Judy: Is he your friend from church or from your old school?

Dani: I know him from my old school. Anyway, Juan and I saw you and Michael the other night, and...

Judy: Where did you see us?

Dani: At the movie theater.

Judy: When? Was it at night or during the day?

Dani: I'm not sure. I guess it was on Saturday night.

Judy: What was the movie?

Dani: I don't know. Uh... I don't remember. It was probably... uh...

Judy: It was the new movie with that guy from the TV series. Did you like the scene where the guy was stuck in the water?

Dani: Yeah... that happened to me before.

Judy: Really? When?

Dani: Last year I guess.

Judy: When last year? During the fall?

Dani: It was during the summer... about middle of July.

Judy: Where'd it happen?

Dani: In the river.

Judy: What river? You mean the pond?

Dani: Hey, I was trying to tell you something about Juan and me!

Judy: What?! You're trying to evade my questions. Just answer me!

The original speaker has found important enough to try to convey. When someone probes, it can have the effect of redirecting the communication to what the receiver wants to know, rather than what the original communicator was trying to express or share. The implicit message is what the originator is trying to express is unimportant. On the other hand, probing if it extends what the person is expressing can be a sign of interest in the communication.

JUDGING

Raj: Jen, could you help me with this please?

Jen: Poor Raj... Always needing help.

Raj: Well, I need help this time. It's hard to lift. Could you help me with the other end?

Jen: Sure, I'll help. Not strong enough, huh?

Raj: Whatever. Let's lift this thing.

Jen: Well, you certainly try hard. Such a hard worker. Keep it up.

Raj: All right already. Grab it and we'll put it over there I think.



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Jen: Why you want to put it there? That's a lousy place to put it. Stupid!
Raj: It might rain. If we put it over there, it won't get wet.
Jen: Oh yeah. Smart guy! It's going to rain tonight. You're smarter than I thought.

Judging cripples communication as the originator will become wary or even paralyzed by fear that his/her thoughts or feelings will be attacked, critiqued, and found wanting. Instead of focusing on the topic the speaker has found to be urgent or interesting, the receiver of the communication focuses on the fallibility of the speaker's opinions. Open communication is shut down.

INTERPRETING

Mom: I'll meet you at the flagpole so we can walk home together.
Nick: Uh, I can't. I'm going to stay after school for a bit. I need to talk to the teacher.
Mom: Uh oh! You got into trouble again!
Nick: No, I didn't. I just need to talk to the teacher about the project I'm working on.
Mom: Yeah, right. You're just trying to kiss up to the teacher.
Nick: Nah... I need to ask the teacher about something.
Mom: Trying to get the teacher to give you all the answers- that's what you're doing.
Nick: Uh uh. I just need to get some help on a couple of parts.
Mom: Sure you are! Hmmm? You just don't want to walk home with me!

As a therapist, I am allowed (sometimes!) to interpret what my clients are saying. However, if I interpret what my wife or kids are saying all the time, I'd be in deep trouble! While it can be a useful therapeutic process, interpreting also implies that what is being said has a deeper alternative meaning that the speaker is unaware of. Clients in therapy give permission for the therapist to make such interpretations. Your partner or your child or other family or friend normally does NOT give such permission, and experiences it as invalidating. However, it can be beneficial if permission is given.

CONFRONTING

Miles: Wow. I've got so much homework tonight.
Walt: I have more homework than you.
Miles: You're always trying to outdo me.
Walt: Me?
Miles: Yeah. If I say I have a lot of homework, you always have more. If I'm good at something, you always want to be better.
Walt: Say what?
Miles: Whatever. You didn't give me back my book.
Walt: Yes, I did. I gave it back yesterday.
Miles: I don't think so. Just check your backpack.
Walt: I can't help it if you lost track of your book.
Miles: Just look.
Walt: I don't lose my stuff. Just more organized than you are. Oh... here it is.
Miles: You make me nuts!

When a person communicates, he/she is normally sharing something important or interesting in his/her life with someone important to him/her. It is a process and dynamic between two equals with mutual interests. The power is equal or not relevant. However, when one is confronted with a



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competition for supremacy, then sharing becomes allowing oneself vulnerable to a hostile party. This is particularly unhealthy between a parent and a child. Unfortunately, some parents with low self-esteem do compete against their children. And of course, the children will lose... in many ways.

ADVISING

Dad: Looks like something is bugging you.

Tak: Yeah... I got a bad grade on the History test.

Dad: Oh... that's too bad. Why don't you ask the teacher for another chance at the test?

Tak: You mean take the test all over again.

Dad: Yep. And next time, be sure to study. You need to study for a test if you want to get a good grade.

Tak: Yeah. I know that. The problem is that I did study for it.

Dad: Well, you probably didn't study long enough. Listen to my advice; you need to study at least a couple of hours to do well on any classroom test. And, you have to have a good quiet place to study- not the kitchen table. And having a study partner is really good.

Tak: My buddy, Arturo studied with me.

Dad: No wonder. That won't work. You need a tutor or an adult to help you. You should get a tutor or your Mom to help you. Yep. That always was what I did.

Tak: Really? How'd you do on tests? Did you get good History grades?

Dad: What? Don't worry about that. Just be sure you study the right way for the next test.

There are many situations where a person may seek advice. When someone seeks advice, he/she places him/herself in a supplicant position symbolically. One seeks advice from someone who is more knowledgeable, more experienced, or wiser; or to get an alternative perspective because one's own perspective may not be clear enough to act. Responding to a sharing of information with advice changes the dynamic of communication- normally without the speaker's permission, often putting the speaker in the one down position. There will be times when your child asks for advice (and many times when you want to give advice), but knowing when it is desired or not- whether it will be well received or considered or not is vital to the overall relationship.

DOMINATING

Sumi: Hey. I just got back from camping with my family. We went to Lake Tahoe.

Zashe: We were at the lake a month or two ago. We camped out too. My uncle taught me how to fish. It was cool; I caught more than he did. He was the expert, but I caught the most fish. The lake is real nice. I really like it... especially camping by it. I learned how to start a fire... a campfire from scratch. We did our cooking on the campfire. Hot dogs, s'mores, and even coffee for the adults.

Sumi: Uh... we did a fire too.

Zashe: It was great! I wish we could have stayed longer. We stayed two weeks. I didn't want to go home. My cousin hid when it was time to leave! We couldn't find him for 15 minutes. He just didn't want to go home. Boy, that fish was good to eat too. We ate a whole bunch. Fried with some green onions. Yum! I got a new fishing pole too. I had an old one but this was a new model. Really cool. Caught a lot of fish. You know, there's a lot of different fish in that lake.

Sumi: I like fishing too. I caught...



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Zashe: Big mouth bass. That's my favorite. There were some of those too. I got some. My uncle caught some too. I didn't like cleaning them though. Too messy and slippery. But I had to clean my own fish. Yuk. But yum to eat later! We saw some deer up there too. A mother and two fawns walked right pass our camp. Oh well, it's getting late. I have to go now. Thanks for telling me about your trip.

Dominators are not interested in the other person's sharing. They are most interested in turning any speaker into an audience. Gaining the other person's attention is the point of any interaction. Sharing the attention or allowing for a mutual reciprocal relationship is not desirable. Dominators do not allow others to have a voice... to count.

PUTTING DOWN

Lee: Hi fool!

Kim: Hi.

Lee: Did you go to the game yesterday?

Kim: Yeah, I was there, but I didn't see you. Were you there too?

Lee: You blind or what? Can't see straight? I was there the whole game.

Kim: Hmmm. Well, I didn't see you at all.

Lee: Dang idiot! I did the scoreboard the first quarter of the game. I was at the scorer's table.

Kim: I must have missed it. I came a little late.

Lee: Late... late... later... slowpoke that's you. Don't you ever get anywhere on time?

Kim: Sure I do. I'm here today on time.

Lee: For once in your life.

Kim: I'm not that late all the time. You should talk. You were late yesterday to meeting. And last week, you were late too.

Lee: No way, Kim-head. I was on time.

Kim: No, you were late.

Lee: No I wasn't, punk breath!

Kim: Yes you were, noodle noggin!

Lee: Fool!

Kim: Double Fool!

Lee: !@#\$\$%

Kim: !@#\$\$%

Some people are playfully tease each other AND the teasing is received playfully. Clear non-verbal messages of affection and playfulness AND permission distinguish this playful teasing from putdowns. Putdowns are intended to take people down in status and there is not the reciprocal permission in playful mutual teasing. When there exists an already inherent power or status difference between two people, then "playful" teasing is more likely to be experienced as putdowns. In any relationship, when someone handles communication by habitually attacking the other person, he/she turns a conversation into a battle. Enough of these battles, the relationship turns into a war. Unfortunately, this happens between couples and within families between parents and children.

The eight conversation stoppers are harmful in any communication but become especially dangerous when involved in the communication of discipline. Interrupting, probing, judging, interpreting, confronting, and advising can have appropriate application at times in



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communication and discipline communication, but one needs to be wary of them becoming over exercised. Dominating and put downs, however, are always dangerous. Although, I missed in discussing eggs and ducks with Tammy, the communication stayed open. Tammy misinterpreted my message but still felt safe to tease me back. Positive interactions had kept the relationship healthy so that it could tolerate a well-intended “educator.” The next article will continue on the role of communication in discipline and relationships.



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Chapter 9

“I CAN’T TELL GRANDMA THAT!”- RULES AND RITUALS

One time in therapy working with a teenage boy Alberto, the topic of his grandmother who lived with him and his parents came up. Grandma had suffered a minor injury in her right leg as a result of a car accident. As a result, Grandma was using a cane to get around the house for the time being. She was expected to have a full recovery within a month or so. However, Grandma, who was fiercely independent would not slow down or restrict her activities one bit. Fortunately, since the injury to her leg made it impossible for her to drive, the family was able to control her activities somewhat since she would need them to drive her to places. But at home, she would insist on moving around, carrying her things (such as her plate to the TV tray from the kitchen) while balancing on her bad leg and cane. Alberto told me that the whole family was stressed worrying that she might fall down and really hurt herself.

I suggested to Alberto, that he tell his grandmother that everyone knew and respected that she was very independent but that she needed to take it easy for a little while until her leg got better... to let the others in the family help her out a little bit. Immediately, a look of surprise and shock spread across his face, “I can’t tell Grandma that!”

What couldn’t Alberto tell his grandmother? It was simple, honest, straightforward, loving, and caring. But it also would have been violating a huge secret rule of the family. When I asked Alberto, why he couldn’t tell his grandmother, he responded, “You just can’t.” When I insisted “why not?” Alberto didn’t know what to say. Alberto clearly knew that he couldn’t tell his grandmother that, but he didn’t know exactly what **that** actually was! In every family, in every group, in every organization there are rules that everyone knows and are obligated to follow. They may be simple household rules such as closing the closet door after getting your jacket or writing thank-you notes that are openly expressed, acknowledged, and enforced. Anyone entering the system of the home, workplace, lunch table, team, etc. usually is quickly informed of or directed to the rules overtly or covertly, or through the disapproval of the “violations.” There is a classic scene in the movie, “The Ten Commandments” where Moses is not so subtly communicated to by his host to burp his approval over the just completed dinner. Moses, not knowing the gracious rule of appreciation in his host’s culture initially is perplexed but eventually comes to the realization of appropriate behavior. His host is delighted when Moses finally burps. Moses received the communication and had learned the “rule” of his host’s household (tenthold!).

People experience this type of implicit learning constantly in their daily lives. When you enter the DMV to register your car, you quickly scan the office for communication cues as to where to go. Entering a new restaurant, you scan to determine whether to seat yourself or to wait for a host or hostess. Or, when you enter your new boyfriend’s or girlfriend’s house, you try to figure out where to sit (or stand!). As your child enters a new classroom, scout meeting, team meeting, friend’s or relative’s house, he/she tries to figure out what is ok and what is death to his/her social status. Outsiders eventually are told (called an “orientation”), discover, or stumble over (making social gaffes) the various rules. Insiders born into a family (or well established over time in a group or job) learn all the rules through a systemic osmosis- ongoing family communication, gradually absorbing all the rules and all their nuances and exceptions.



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SECRETS

Many families/systems, in addition to overt rules, also have secrets. Secrets are often truths that everyone is aware of at some level, but no one feels safe to communicate. Secrets are tightly held by individuals and systems to avoid the discomfort that open acknowledgement of the secret would create. For example, although everyone knows or has experienced a particular person in the system (mom, for example) as having trouble with controlling his/her alcohol use, no one mentions it since acknowledging it would hurt the person's feelings and/or create tension from the possibility of the person losing his/her status/position. Or, everyone knows that a family member has a characterological flaw (a violent temper, for example) that impedes successful family functioning, but no one acknowledges it in the group (although two members may acknowledge it between themselves). Insiders know not only the rules and all their nuances and exceptions, but also the secret unexpressed rules. As an outsider (the therapist), I didn't know the rules of Alberto's family, much less the secret rules. I didn't know that breaking the rule would make Grandma uncomfortable... would make Alberto uncomfortable. Alberto "knew" the rule in that he was bound by it, but since it was a secret rule, he had never spoken it out loud nor had it overtly taught to him out loud. Only when I, in my ignorance of the family rules, had the audacity to suggest a violation of that rule, did he have an inkling that there was a rule!

Alberto's fiercely independent grandmother always asserted her continued competence despite her advancing age. In fact, as she faced the normal decline of ambulatory abilities and minor memory, she was terrified that her decline would leave her senile and helpless (as she had observed with horror, her grandparents and parents deterioration). Any hint that she was changing for the worse or mentioning of reduced competency- even signs of normal and benign aging made her very upset that she would go into a frantic and angry denial. The family had learned to defer to her when this happened. They deferred even though they were often anxious (sometimes, scared to death!) because her "independence" created dangerous situations for herself and the family- a forgotten pot cooking on the stove, shaky transit up and down the stairs, and erratic driving. Her son and daughter-in-law knew her secret fear consciously, but Alberto and his siblings obeyed the secret "rule"- never to remind Grandma of her mortality or aging, or even hint at it. My query to him to tell his grandmother to ease up while her leg healed was tantamount to asking him to betray this secret family rule.

IMPLICIT RULES- CONSEQUENCES

Every family/system has rules about communication (and behavior): who may speak up, when, and how. For example, there may be a rule that no one is allowed to directly criticize anyone- or quite commonly, that no one is allowed to openly criticize dad in particular. Then in a family meeting, if someone has a criticism of how dad is acting, s/he will present it in an abstract form rather than specifically naming dad and his behavior. The family member might not specifically complain that dad does not do chores and he should. Such rules can be transferred unknowingly and in an unhealthy manner into new groups including marriage and work. I had such an experience in one of my prior jobs. The supervisor had a specific issue with one of the staff. The staff person was not being responsible with some duties and as a result, caused impediments for other staff in doing their jobs. As we all sat in the staff meeting, the supervisor began by reiterating the general expectations and the problems that non-compliance caused. I remember pondering with great consternation, was he talking about me? Had I done something? I glanced at the other staff people, and saw the same looks of confusion- had they done something? Finally, as he continued with additional issues of



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concern, I recognized what the specific issue and the actual person to whom this was all directed towards, that is, the person who had been irresponsible. Of course, that person had a look of blissful ignorance and innocence on his face! That's another story! Somehow the supervisor had transferred a rule of communication (probably from his family experiences)- not to directly confront someone with criticism to the work situation. Because this was ineffective, other staff were stuck with the irresponsible co-worker and had to make up for his deficiencies. Resentment grew and a distrust that the administration valued their concerns developed. The staff eventually became acclimated (seduced... intimidated...) to the secret rule since they were "punished" by the supervisor whenever they broke the rule by criticizing specifically. When I assumed a supervisory position, it was difficult to get others to break the rule and be direct, or to accept my direct feedback and expectations. The consequence of the prior dysfunction made it more difficult to have an honest and healthier organization with greater personal accountability and responsibility.

Some of these kinds of rules are explicit and recognized by all members; others are implicit, and are generally only recognized when they are broken. Implicit rules tend to be extremely powerful and problematic. They are often harmful. Identifying the implicit rules and eliminating dysfunctional rules and clarifying well-intended rules are important to positive relationships. Alberto was bound by such an implicit rule and it caused him and others in the family great distress. In fact, it jeopardized the physical safety of his grandmother and others in the family. The otherwise straightforward and logical rules and boundaries of discipline become harmed as well, if there are secret nuances and exceptions to those rules and boundaries.

Children learn that they are to ask for help if something is too hard for them to do on their own but are stymied with the secret rule- but do not "interrupt" mom if she is in a bad mood. Children are encouraged to be open and candid with their parents with their concerns without fear, but are blocked by the mood exception- better not bring anything difficult up to dad when he's stressed from work. Children are taught to emulate their parents and treat everyone with respect but another secret rule confuses them- their parents hold the exception to the rule if they feel wronged (the self-righteous exception) and thus feel justified to be disrespectful to others. Children are expected to do their chores but the secret "school priority" rule interferes- that they don't have to do the chores if there is a school function to attend or homework to do, even if there had been time to do chores and the child had wasted the time with television, video games, or other fooling around. Often parents hold children to these secret rules while having amnesia about the existence of the rules themselves! And then, be upset that the child didn't interrupt and bring up the earlier concern that they now see is important (or was important) and now has negative consequences, or be surprised at their children's self-righteous indignation and sense of being wronged, or that their children are nonchalant about getting chores done.

RITUALS- OF TURKEY LEGS

Every family/system also has rituals (sets and patterns of behavior) that members are required to follow. Like rules, some are implicit rather than explicit, and some are harmful, while others serve the system. The father and mother putting the children to bed every night (bath, brushing teeth, putting on PJ's, reading a book, tucking in, placement of snugglies, etc.) is an explicit ritual that serves the system in that it helps both the children and their parents feel connected to each other. It also is a transition ritual to move from the waking to the sleeping world. This ritual serves to increase communication and self-esteem. Rituals give security to its members. Identifying and creating positive rituals lead to better communication and cohesion. Some rituals have origins that



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have lost meaning, yet still direct and even restrict functioning arbitrarily. Such rituals should be examined to determine current applicability. Still other rituals are so ingrained that they continue to define current functioning despite the loss of their original relevance.

A classic story is the turkey legs story to illustrate forgotten origins. The children of the family come to realize that the cooks of the family always cut the turkey legs off and roasted them and the rest of the turkey separately for the Thanksgiving dinner. Their curiosity as to its origins of this odd ritual, led them to ask their parents, “Why do we cut off the turkey legs when we cook Thanksgiving turkey?” Their parents, the assorted aunts and uncles, replied, “Why, that’s what we always do. That’s what your grandparents always did, so we just kept up the tradition.” Unsatisfied, the children went to their grandmother and great-aunt, and asked them, “Why do we cut off the turkey legs when we cook Thanksgiving turkey?” Their grandmother responded, “That’s how our mom- your great-grandmother always cooked it, so we just continued the family tradition.” That still didn’t make sense, so they found their great-grandmother who was sitting quietly in the corner, enjoying her large extended family. “Nana,” they asked, “Why do we cut off the turkey legs when we cook Thanksgiving turkey? Everybody says they learned that from you as the family tradition.” Nana smiled and replied in a quiet but strong voice, “I don’t know about everybody else, but I didn’t have a pan that was big enough!”

Some of the rituals and traditions of families and of discipline come from older times where the family and social situations were very different. What developed helped families and communities survive the demands of the times. However, as the demands of the times have changed, some rituals and traditions have been carried forward without any examination for their current relevance. For example, unquestioned obedience to the authority and demands of adult authority figures may have been vital to learning the social behavior for survival in less civilized communities and times, when a mistake could be literally fatal. Having a question or an alternative perspective was considered defiant and blasphemous. In modern times, when critical thinking in a democratic and evolving society is vital to success, then questioning rules, rituals, and tradition (questioning authority- the mantra of the 60’s hippie generation!) becomes important to meeting the new demands and challenges of a never experienced and often unanticipated changing world community.

RITUALS- ROCKET TECHNOLOGY

On the other hand, some traditions or rituals are so ingrained into the fabric of our society that they cannot be altered without major and unacceptable consequences. The space shuttle and the Roman war chariot is such an example. The space shuttle technology is among the most advanced in modern times (despite two horrific accidents). The space shuttle has a large rocket to which it is attached that provides some of the major propulsion for its liftoff. Interestingly, it is only so wide in diameter. A rocket wider in diameter would hold a greater supply of fuel, thus providing greater power upon liftoff. Despite this, the size is smaller than it could be. The reason for the smaller diameter is that the rocket is built at a factory that is far from Cape Canaveral and needs to be transported by train there. The trains sometimes need to go through tunnels only slightly wider than the width of the train itself which limits the diameter the rocket can be. So, why are the trains (and tunnels) only that wide? Why are the tracks that wide- a bit wider than a meter or almost four feet? The tracks are that wide because the first trains in America were built by the early wagon and carriage makers in America, and they used the same dimensions they used for the wagons and carriages. Where did they get those measurements? Well, those early American wagon and



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carriage makers were from Great Britain and they were continuing the style and make (and measurements) of the British wagons and carriage makers. And, Great Britain wagon and carriage measurements? In the roads of Great Britain, were ruts that any vehicle with either wider or shorter axles than the ruts could not transverse without the axles breaking, so all wagons and carriages were built with axles that were the same width as the ruts. And the ruts? The ruts turned out to have been worn into the roads by the great Roman war chariots. Many of the early roads of Europe were built as part of the conquest of Europe by the Roman Empire's legions. So, why did the Roman war chariot have those particular measurements? The Roman war chariot was designed (from over two thousand years ago) to fit the two horses that side by side were required to pull it. So in other words, some of the most advanced technology in the world- the rocket that propels the space shuttle out of earth's gravitational pull, was determined by the width of two Italian horses' butts over two thousand years ago!

Aside from being a cute story (less cute with the recent Columbia shuttle disaster), it illustrates a tradition or present day consequence of a very old set of circumstances. However, while it would be relatively easy to get a larger pan so as not to need to cut off the turkey legs, although the roads are now paved and there are not the same ruts that force axles to be any particular widths, to change the widths of the thousands of miles of railroad tracks, retool and re-engineer the axles of all the existing train engines and railcars, and to widen all the train tunnels in America would be impractical, not to mention outrageous and needlessly expensive.

Certain traditions, rituals, and developed behaviors and other expressions from older demands although no longer functionally relevant, the traditions, rituals, and developed behaviors and other expressions may have become so integrated and intertwined into current functioning that they cannot be easily dropped. The cost to benefit ratio is too high or it's change is not time or energy efficient. For example, if a family may have established over many years that the father is the head of the household especially with regard to matters of discipline. While it may be beneficial overall for the family to re-balance its authoritative hierarchy between the mother and father, the situation may be so demanding that it is not possible or prudent. If a teenager is in crisis... out of control with drug, sexual, or violent behavior, the situation may not tolerate the time and energy to resort the family dynamic. Then, using the authority (or even authoritarian intimidation) of the father to stop an imminent disaster becomes acceptable **now**, even if it is part of the family dysfunction and needs to be changed for long-term health. The immediate crisis- life threatening behavior endangering the teenager (which even may have been precipitated by the family dysfunction including the father's domination) needs immediate intervention, which arguably justifies "allowing" the old dysfunction to exist and be exercised (the father stepping in and demanding obedience) if it stops the immediate danger to the teenager.

IDENTIFYING RULES AND RITUALS

Identifying the implicit rules and rituals of a family enables a family (parents, in particular) to accept and maintain the positive ones, have choice as to whether to keep the benign ones, eliminate the dysfunctional ones, and helps to clarify the well-intended but problematic ones. Rules and rituals when positive give stability, predictability, and security to family members, especially children. When parents try to enforce (discipline around) harmful rules and rituals, children are triplely hurt. First, they are harmed as they learn non-sensical rules and rituals that take time, energy, and spirit from them both during childhood and potentially for life (and into subsequent generations). Second, they are harmed as they are punished unreasonably for their "violations" of



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such rules and rituals. And, third, their sense of logic and reason becomes distorted, perhaps chronically, as the secrets and implicit meanings are denied and a psuedo-logic is indoctrinated into them. What are your rules and rituals in the family? What rules and rituals did you bring into the family from your family of origin? What are you communicating? Question the authority of what was given to you from your family of origin. Question your own authority!



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Chapter 10

PLAY THIS GAME AND EVERYONE LOSES

Dad: Damn, look at this credit card bill!

Mom: (is he mad?)

Dad: What are all these charges?

Mom: Uh, what charges? (Is he really asking about the charges? Or, is he getting mad?)

Dad: You need to watch your spending.

Mom: Yes, I'll watch my spending. (Agree with him... maybe that will calm him down)

Dad: You always spend too much money with those credit cards!

Mom: I know... I know... I'm sorry. (Please... please don't get mad)

Kid: There's a nasty smell in the bedroom.

Dad: What!? What did you say? Nasty smell? Where? What did you do now!?

Virginia Satir, a well-known family theorist and therapist believed that good communication led to high self-esteem. When someone speaks to you in a manner that conveys his/her respect of you, that conveys that he or she cares about you, and that your feelings and thoughts are important to him or her, then your self-esteem rises. Poor communication, on the other hand causes you to lose self-esteem. Communication that conveys disrespect, a disregard of your feelings and thoughts implies that you have no basic worth. Poor communication that harms self-esteem does not have to be obviously and overtly negative, that is you don't need to call someone stupid to make them feel stupid; you don't need to call someone incompetent to imply that you think they are incompetent. While name-calling clearly can be harmful, there are also insidious other styles of communication that can be even more harmful. In healthy families with healthy individuals, good communication builds self-esteem. In unhealthy families with unhealthy individuals, poor communication constantly tears down the self-esteem of every member. Communication is not only the verbal messages that are given to each other, but also the nonverbal messages. Nonverbal messages include tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, actions, and lack of actions or behavior. Individuals often end up taking characteristic roles in communication dyads and triads. Many of the roles expressed in "games" that are played between members are dysfunctional. For example, there is the rescue game. In the rescue game, one person agrees although he/she may not really agree, but does so in order to placate the other person or people -- the avoiding conflict hopefully. A second person will disagree and blame someone else. Finding this distressful, a third person will do something that will distract person everyone's attention away from the conflict.

In the vignette above, as mom and dad are talking about the credit card bill, the tension starts to increase between them. The dad begins to get angry looking at the expenses and says angrily, "You need to watch your spending." The phrase "You need to..." implies clearly that she has not done so -- that she needed to, but obviously didn't... a slam against her competency in managing money. Her self-esteem goes down. The mother hurriedly agrees, "Yes, I'll watch my spending," hoping this quick agreement will prevent an argument. In the tone of the response, a little bit of anxiety or fear is expressed. His self-esteem is attacked as the implicit message is that his wife experiences him as a bit dangerous or unreasonable. Rather than addressing this, he gets defensive. The blaming starts, "You always spend too much money with those credit cards!" The word "always" (likewise "never" and "all the time") is restrictive, trapping, and condemning. Her self-esteem takes another blow. Still trying to placate him, she responds meekly, "I know... I know... I'm sorry." The meek



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apology implies that he is an overbearing hurtful and insensitive ogre. Even if he is been an ogre, it is insulting to be treated as one. Strong, strong-willed, assertive... are all acceptable in his self-identification, however overbearing, hurtful, or insensitive insults or demeans his self-image. His face reddens and his eyes bulge. Sensing an ugly fight about to begin, the kid blurts out, "There's a nasty smell in the bedroom." The kid hopes that this will distract his parents from fighting; the distraction will also rescue his mother from his father's anger. Sometimes the kid is successful in distracting the anger from his mother, but unfortunately the anger may be directed at him instead. "What!? What did you say? Nasty smell? Where? What did you do now?!" Or, "Don't interrupt us when we're talking!" The kid will persist in drawing the attention to himself until he is sure that the fight between the parents will be avoided. In doing so he may infuriate both parents. The discipline that follows -- the punishments that follow are the sacrifices the child endures to prevent him other pain in the family. His self-esteem is damaged severely. In this kind of scenario, the family looks at how to discipline the child when in actuality, it is the family or the couple that needs to be disciplined about how they interact with each other. Unfortunately, in some families the acting out behavior of children that draw discipline, is actually a consequence of deeper issues within the family -- often serious conflict between the parents. Sometimes, it easier (less dangerous) for the parents to direct their attention (and their anger) toward disciplining children, than addressing the deep issues and problems in their couples relationship. The children become scapegoated for the parents' issues. In this type of situation, the discipline may "work" or not "work" on the children. However, the underlying distress and pain in the family will most likely erupt in some other manner at some other point. Play this game and everyone loses. This is not the only game that is dysfunctional. There is also the coalition game- two people placate (two agree), one person blames (disagrees); or one placates, and the other two blame. Another is the lethal game- everybody placates (acts like they agree or give in, or give up) at the expense of his or her own needs.

A healthier game -- the growth game, allows for each person to agree or disagree as he or she sees fit. Everyone is included and no one ignores his/her own needs. In the example above, the father would be able to express his anger and frustration, but without blaming and attacking his wife. He would be able to handle the insecurity that the bills cause him. He would activate internal and external processes -- a deep breath, a quick mental accounting of financial resources, and perhaps saying, "Yikes, this is a big bill!" A simple rule from couples therapy would be useful here -- avoid starting a sentence with the word "you" and instead, use "we." "You need to stop..." is an accusation and an attack. "We need to figure this out" expresses unity and joint responsibility -- and caring not only about the bill, but also about the partner. Figuring out who made which purchases would be done in a more respectful manner. The mother would be able to assert her needs, her rights, and take appropriate responsibility. Acknowledging which purchases that she made, would be an acceptance of responsibility rather than an acceptance of blame. Negotiating the priorities and the limits of expenses that can be incurred for the family becomes a practical matter as opposed to a way to assign degrees of fault -- to be forced to accept the designation of being the negligent, careless, and irresponsible one. As she is approached as a responsible member of the family partnership, a clear message of worth is given to her. Her self-esteem rises. Their interaction is more likely to be successful -- a financial plan is derived. Her interest and concern validates this concern. Her participation as a partner -- that he is not in this situation alone reassures him. His self-esteem also rises. The little boy would not have to sacrifice his own self-esteem in order to try to protect his parents from a battle. His needs would be met -- to be a little boy! He could effectively ignore the discussion or listened with interest without feeling compelled to keep his



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parents from their interaction. He also gets to experience this parents negotiating a charged issue in a healthy manner with mutual respect. His security is increased because of his growing confidence that his parents can handle difficult situations well. This becomes his model for how he will handle interactions in his adulthood. He will have greater confidence having experienced this model. His self-esteem also grows. The growth game is only healthy game that builds self-esteem for everyone without losing self-esteem for others.

INDICATORS OF POOR COMMUNICATION

The therapeutic implication of this theory is that families need to teach themselves to communicate with respect and caring even when they are anxious, angry, or under a lot of stress. They need to be aware when the communication tears down self-esteem as well. There are certain indicators of poor communication in a family. When these indicators are recognized, then the family can activate to work on improving communication, and thus improve self-esteem within family members. If feelings are blocked or inappropriately expressed, such as crying when something happy has happened or being unable to cry when being sad, then that is a clear indication that communication work needs to be done. In the family and couples therapy that I have provided, there have been individuals who have been unable to express sadness or anger when clearly they are sad or angry. For example, occasionally I will have a man who says that he does not let himself be angry. This would be right after his wife has clearly said something hurtful and provocative. When I point out that I expected him to be angry, he denies it. "I don't let myself be angry." At that point, I have to grip my chair tightly to restrain myself from jumping up, crossing over to him and kicking him in the knees! And, then asking, "Please show me how you don't get angry, now!" Getting angry is not a choice -- is something that happens immediately and instinctively. Afterwards, then the person chooses how to respond to his/her anger and how to act, depending on training and modeling. When someone denies their anger, they also deny it to the people they interact with. The other person experiences the anger (in the facial expression, in the body language, in the tone of voice, in small action, and in the absence of action). Yet, the angry person continues to deny that they are angry. And the other person may become confused and uncertain about their own abilities to evaluate the people and the world around them. Self-esteem is harmed.

COVERT COMMUNICATION

Another indicator of poor communication is when the communication is not clear and overt. Messages have to be interpreted and interpreted from particular perspectives that may or may not be obvious. While the communication is covert, there is still the expectation that the other person will clearly understand what is actually intended. Of course, this means that there will be misinterpretations and consequences of those misinterpretations -- hurt feelings and missed connections. The symbolism of the communication is missed. In one couple that I worked with, the husband's childhood experience of being loved was defined by his mother making a hot dinner for him and his siblings and father every evening. The making of dinner was a message of love from her to the rest of the family. Now married, when he was able to get off of work early, he would go to the grocery store to shop and rush home to make a hot meal for his wife and him. When she got home, as a busy professional she often had to make some last-minute calls, send a quick fax or e-mail before settling down to dinner and the evening routine. He would call out to her, "Honey, dinner is ready." Sitting at the computer, she would call back, "Go ahead and start eating without me." Somewhat in shock, he would insist, "Come eat while it's hot." His first communication actually was the communication of caring and love in the dinner that he had made for his wife. Inadvertently, she had rejected his love. She had missed the first covert communication. Then



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when he insisted, he had given an additional communication whose underlying message was that it was very important for her to accept his love -- that is, dinner. She missed the second communication. And, he was terribly hurt.

Shortly afterwards, when she came to dinner, he commented/complained that the dinner was cold now. The covert communication this time was that he was disappointed or hurt that she had rejected his affection -- effectively rejecting his love. Again, she missed the covert communication so she addressed the temperature of the meal! As opposed to his rising temperature! "It's not too cold." Since she missed the communication, he tried again (but not addressing his actual issue or hurt), "It doesn't taste as good when it's cold," which really meant "I really need and want you to receive my love." Since this was still covert communication, she missed it again and responded to the taste issue! "It tastes fine." At this point, she started to get impatient and upset because all the talk about the coldness and the taste of the food did not make any sense to her. However, she could tell by his tone and his facial expression that he was upset. They then proceeded to have a tense meal but not before they had a 15 minute fight about food temperature and taste! Never did they even talk about the offer of love that he had tried to make, that is, until they came to therapy later in the week.

DEAD END COMMUNICATION AND STANCES

In the previous example, the communication went around and around without ever getting anywhere. The comments and points that were made, were made over and over w/o ever getting the couple any farther along in understanding or intimacy. In closed communication, instead of continuing in an endless cycle, communication hits a dead end. "Because I say so!" "If that's what you really think." "So, you think I'm stupid or something?" "You don't really care." "No, no, never mind." These types of communication get people stuck without any place to go emotionally or intellectually. They are left holding their issues, concerns, or grievances without recourse. "Too bad." This leads to frustration and sometimes, a sense of powerlessness and bitterness. Self-esteem again is harmed. Dysfunctional rules and rituals can develop in order to help people do with their sense of powerlessness and most self-esteem. In the previous article we discussed some of these rituals and secrets that are held. Low self-esteem, in of itself is an indicator of poor communication in a family.

In order to survive the low self-esteem, individuals in the family may take on particular roles or stances. A person may take on the victim role. He/she will see him/herself as a victim of other people's actions. The basic stance is that there is nothing that the person can do to control his/her destiny. Whatever "fate" or those in control of the world (family, playground, neighborhood) decides, he or she is the victim and has to take the consequences. The victim personality will fail to see the power that he/she has been his/her world. Victims seeking the little power they feel they can have, do so through the kindness or the pity of other people. They look always to be rescued. Fortunately (or unfortunately, because it perpetuates the victim mentality), there are other individuals who take on the role of rescuers. Rescuers do not have a sense of self-esteem unless there is someone to rescue. There are professional rescuers who become human service professionals such as therapists, social workers, teachers, and the like. While rescuers love to save victims, at a deeper level they actually need victims to stay victims so that they can keep fulfilling their roles in as rescuers. Some individuals who feel always that they are under attack and subject to be blamed, become the blamers. They always blame other people for the problems of the world and the problems they themselves suffer. At the core, blamers are similar to victims in their sense of helplessness. The difference is that blamers rather than simply and passively accepting their fate,



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loudly bemoan their fate as being caused by others. In a sense they are the loud and vocal victims! Unfortunately, as blamers accuse everyone else, they bring reprisals upon themselves. Other people get sick of their whining and begin to avoid them.

Gender stereotypes and cultural training may push some people toward particular stances. The historical weaker power of women economically and socially may guide females toward the victim role. On the other hand, the traditional role of men as dominant and as problem solvers in communities and families, tend to push them toward the computer role. The computer role is nonemotional (not unemotional) and asserts that is all is logical and rational. In the computer role, a person asserts that the other person is being emotional and irrational, unable to see the clear logic that he/she is so securely and self-righteously attuned. Again, in a couples therapy setting, I have often run across this when often a man (but sometimes, a woman) asserts that the other person is irrationally emotional, that his clear analytical thinking is superior in evaluating the dynamics and circumstances in the relationship. I find amusing when I assert to such an individual, that eliminating emotion from the dynamic is illogical! That not only is emotion of a logical component of every interaction and relationship, but that is logical to assert that a relationship without emotion is pointless. Computer types often find emotion to be overwhelming -- or at least, very difficult to handle. Eliminating it, is an attempt to keep their sense of power and control -- their self-esteem intact. Highly intellectual types will do this and present, what I call a type of "pseudo-logic." Other people call it BS!

Earlier, I gave an example of the distracter who also became a scapegoat. However, a distracter can serve the family quite well by being funny, charming, cute, or even a very high achiever or performer. His/her behavior draws the family's attention to him/herself, for better or worse for his/her self-esteem. The distracter's self-esteem becomes dependent on how well he/she can successfully draw the family's attention away from their pain or conflict. The scapegoat's, on the other hand, basic methodology is to be bad. To misbehave, be outrageous, be defiant, or otherwise disruptive in any manner to draw the attention and ire of the family towards him/her. Again, this draws the family away from its pain. The scapegoat has his/her self-esteem under constant assault as he/she draws discipline and punishment -- clear messages that he/she is bad. Ironically, the scapegoat gains a kind of perverse self-esteem at how outrageous and how disruptive -- how bad, she/he can be. Often only able to be accepted by other scapegoat types -- the bad kids, the more antisocial they are, the more status they have in the group of social outcasts.

Most people think that discipline is about affecting the behavior of children. They feel that children need to learn discipline. They look at children's behavior in isolation, and thus they discipline in isolation as well. The most important... the most effective discipline may be in the family's ability to discipline itself. The greatest cause of inappropriate children's behavior may not be some internal process in the children or some character or moral flaw in the children, but the failure of the family to discipline itself -- to discipline its own processes including its communication processes. The next article will look at the classic dysfunctional family and how it promotes dysfunctional and harmful behavior and roles in its children.



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Chapter 11

TAKING ONE FOR THE FAMILY

Imagine a pond. A pond is in balance. The system is in balance. There is water, air, sunshine, and numerous nutrients. There are a few big fish in the pond. There are enough little fish for the big fish to eat. There are enough insects and other bugs for the little fish to eat, and there are even enough insects and bugs for a nice population of frogs to coexist in the pond too. There is enough vegetation both in the pond and around the pond for the insects and other bugs to sustain their own population. Everything is in balance -- the system is in balance. Imagine then, if suddenly another large fish drops into the pond unexpectedly. The other large fish now find that there is greater competition to eat the little fish. As a result, there are fewer little fish. With fewer little fish for the frogs to compete against, the frogs grow fat eating the insects and bugs. They grow fat and they propagate themselves -- soon there is a frog population explosion! The system is in balance, again. Eventually, since there are fewer little fish for them to eat, over time the population of big fish goes down since it cannot be sustained. The system is in balance, once again! Then, since there are not so many big fish to eat the little fish, the little fish are able to survive and the little fish population grows again; and begins to compete with the frogs again for the bugs and the insects, causing a reduction in the frog population eventually... and so on, and so on. And the moral of the story? Your family is like a pond!

Every family is a system. And in every system, there is a balance between each member of the system. When there is a change with any member of the system, or any element of the system, the entire system reacts to rebalance itself. A mobile hanging down from the ceiling is an example of such a system. If someone touches the moves one part of the mobile, the entire mobile reacts to the touch. If one part of the mobile is removed, the entire mobile also reacts. If something is added to or deleted from a part of the mobile, creating a change in weight, again the entire mobile responds. Every family is a system where each of the members affects each other. Where things that affect any member, eventually affect all of the members. When there is a circumstance or an element that affect the family as a unit, the effect resonates throughout the entire family functioning.

When I was running a preschool in day care, there was a little boy who had been toilet trained for about three months. Inexplicably, once in awhile he would wet himself. We could not figure out what was going on. He wasn't getting so involved in his play, that he forgot himself. In fact, after a few accidents, we put him on a schedule and sent them to the restroom regularly. That didn't work. We checked to see if he was getting sick, since many young children when they are getting sick may have toilet accidents. He was healthy as an ox. He was three and a quarter years old -- his toilet training was stable. Some children when they have just become toilet trained have a rather tentative stability about using the bathroom. He was okay. As we (and his parents) were surprised and perplexed about what was causing him to wet himself, we consulted with each other. I asked a simple question -- "Is there anything different going on at home?" "Well," said the mother, "my mother is visiting and staying with us." Bingo! Little John was absolutely thrilled to have Grandma on visiting. He was so thrilled, that he couldn't keep himself dry! The system had a new element in it -- Grandma. She wasn't a negative element -- everyone adored her, but she was a new element in the system. And, the system needed to rebalance. Little John was affected and his imbalance was expressed in wetting himself.



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Sometimes the change in the system is not the addition of something new, but the removal of something. A more obvious example is when parents separate and one of the parents no longer lives in the house. It takes a significant amount of time, and energy, and also often stress for the system -- the family to rebalance. Each member of the family still in the household, the other parent, the children, and even the dog has to reconcile the absence! The change may actually be for the good (the ending of toxic conflict and anxiety in the family system) but nevertheless, it will take time to adjust. This is when otherwise well-behaved children may act out, become depressed, developed school phobias, or somatize their disruption with upset stomachs or headaches. A more subtle example -- but in the same vein, would be one parent changing their work hours in a way that he or she is somewhat less available than previously experienced in the family, or more available! It could be a teenager taking on a social activity or sport that has him or her away from the family in the early evening or part of a weekend. The system has been altered, and needs to rebalance. Somebody else may need to take out the garbage or wash the dishes. Another time for communicating about activities may need to be found.

Eventually, the system will rebalance. One of the big questions, however, is whether it will rebalance in a healthy manner or in a dysfunctional manner. What kind of energy... or even what kind of pain will it take for the family stay in balance? Will it be a stable balance? Or will it be a tenuous balance? Will it be healthy for each member of the family in this new balance? Or will there be severe physical, energy, emotional, or psychological cost for certain members of the family to maintain this new balance?

THE CLASSIC FUNCTIONAL FAMILY SYSTEM

Imagine a platter balanced on a point. This platter is the family system. In the middle of the platter, stand the parents. In the classic nuclear family, it would be two parents -- a husband and wife. In other family systems (also functional), it could be a single parent, a pair of same-sex parents, a grandmother, uncle, or other extended family member, a foster parent, and so forth. What is important is that there is someone or are someones that are "centered" in the family system -- the platter. The centered people, who are emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, and (usually) physically healthy people provide stability for the entire system. They are like the child who stands in the middle of a seesaw. There might be a bigger child on one end of the seesaw, and a very active energetic child on the other end of the seesaw, but the child who stands in the middle of the seesaw with a foot on either side of the center can shift his or her weight this way or that way to create stability to make the seesaw work well.

The parents have this responsibility. If someone is sad in the family, the centered parents can shift attention and energy towards that person to meet him or her needs. If one of the children is particularly boisterous and has very high energy that needs to be expressed without getting in trouble, the centered parents can shift resources and time and perhaps provide this child an outlet in sports or dance. If the noise and energy level in the house has gotten out of hand on a rainy winter weekend day, the centered parents can provide an activity to direct the children and the family into a more productive interaction. From the children's perspective, the centered parents allow the children to be children. In many ways, this is the gift of being an American. Or, the gift of being stable enough to address the fundamental family needs as parents without involving the children to meet those needs. An American ideal is for children to enjoy being a child -- to enjoy the developmental process of being a child, to play and explore, to grow and develop. In many



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societies, including poorer communities or families in America, children are not allowed the luxury of being a child in this sense. They are required -- needed as active members of the family economy.

THE CLASSIC DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY

On the other hand, the classic dysfunctional family (of which, the classic example is the alcoholic family system) needs the children to maintain the functioning of the family. Imagine again a family system as a platter. This time, however, the parents instead of being centered in the platter are "off-center" on the edges of the platter. One of them because of emotional, psychological, or drug or alcohol problems is "out there." He or she is unable to provide balancing -- the responsiveness to the children's needs that the centered parents provide. This dysfunctional parent is preoccupied with dealing with whatever emotional, psychological or drug or alcohol issue. In addition, there are other behavioral issues, particularly workaholicism, which may appear positive, but are also harmful. If there are two parents, the other parent has to deal with the irresponsible behavior of the first parent. Since the first parent is under-responsible, the second parent has to be over-responsible. The first parent cannot be counted on to do the simple things: pick up the laundry, pick up the kids from school, remember an appointment, deposit a check, and so forth. Therefore, the second -- over-responsible parent has to anticipate how the first parent will screw up. Instead of informing or just reminding the first parent to pick up the laundry, pick up the kids, the appointment time, or to deposit a check, the second parent also has to have contingency plans for when the first parent forgets or messes up. He or she has to have an alternative wardrobe, set aside time to rush and pick up the kids, handle the appointment by him or herself, or have an excuse ready when the check bounces. Ironically, it is the dedication of the second parent that "allows" the first parent to be irresponsible. If the second parent didn't make up for the flaws in the first parent's personality and behavior, the family would fall apart. As long as the family is maintained, even though at great cost to everyone especially the second parent, the irresponsible parent does not have to pay the complete consequences of his or her actions.

One time, I was very direct with the wife of an alcoholic. I told her that she helped her husband stay an alcoholic. In surprise, she asked, "What do you mean?" I told her, she helped her husband stay an alcoholic when she called in on Monday mornings to tell his boss that he was sick when he was actually hung over; when she made excuses to her son about why Dad did not come to his baseball game; when she dropped everything and raced across town to pick up her daughter's dress that she needed for her recital -- a dress her husband had promised to pick up; and when she picked him up off of the kitchen floor, clean him up, and put him into bed after he had passed out and had fallen asleep in his own fluids. She responded, "Oh."

THE HERO

In this family setup, the parents are so involved in their respective addictions -- in the example above: he with his addiction-his alcohol and her with her addiction-him, that neither one of them really performs their essential role -- to be parents! As a result, the children take up these roles. A very common role is the role of the Hero or the responsible one. This child makes sure that the daily life of the household goes on. He or she makes the dinners and the lunches, cleans the house, and makes sure the other children get their basic needs met. The Hero child is often well respected in other settings including school and later on in work. Football quarterback, CEO, successful businessperson... a real achiever. He or she can be counted on to get things done. Unfortunately, he or she is not allowed to be a child and never really internalizes a sense of self-worth. He or she



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tends to be a well educated, financially successful, well respected, but secretly unfulfilled and depressed person.

THE NURTURER

Another role in the family that normally is handled by one or both of the parents is that of the Nurturer. The Nurturer takes care of the emotional needs of the family: soothing the sad child (even though he or she is a child him or herself as well), being caring and vigilant about everyone and their feelings. Everyone likes the Nurturer. Some Nurturers grow up to be professional Nurturers... professional caregivers such as teachers, therapists and counselors, social workers, nurses or other medical personnel, and so forth. Social gender stereotypes and culture make this role even more likely for girls becoming women. Sweet, kind, and considerate, the Nurturer is valued by everyone -- except him or herself. He or she nurtures everyone, but is unable to take care of his or her own emotional needs. Both the Hero and the Nurturer do their roles so that the family does not fall apart. Unfortunately, each of them pays a terrible price emotionally and psychologically inside. And, the family and its members may seemingly make it day to day, but will suffer and be damaged anyway.

THE LOST CHILD

Often times, there is a Lost Child in such a family. The Lost Child somehow realizes that this family cannot meet his or her emotional needs and decides to no longer be disappointed... to no longer have hope that his or her needs will be met, and spends his or her energy trying to be an invisible person. The Lost Child will exist in classrooms, church, and at work and will be barely noticed... rarely even missed. His or her experience with attention in his or her dysfunctional family is that attention brings on negative experiences. Avoiding attention -- becoming invisible is the safest and surest method for survival. When he or she is encouraged, the Lost Child will not take encouragement and risk any challenge. Survival is the best that he or she thinks he or she can have. Such a person will not cause problems in their communities or workplaces -- causing problems would bring unwanted attention upon him or herself. However, this does not mean that he or she is happy or fulfilled. The Lost Child is usually quietly and desperately depressed. And so is the adult Lost Child.

THE DISTRACTERS

In the dysfunctional family, despite the efforts of the Hero and the Nurturer tension will inevitably arise and increase with eventual eruptions that can be very painful. The Distracter in the family will then sometimes save the family from the tension by distracting them. There are two kinds of distracters. One is the Mascot. The Mascot, often the youngest, is adorable. Everyone loves the Mascot; he or she is often the sunshine of the family... just about perfect. In this family with so much pain and dysfunction, there is a powerful need to have some positives -- some sunshine, and the Mascot is it. How wonderful is the Mascot! How sweet... how smart... how wonderful! However the Mascot must stay perfect... he or she cannot mess up -- ever. Or else, the sunshine of the entire family will be eclipsed. The Mascot performs his or her role and usually is well liked and even adored by everyone, including those outside of the family. The Mascot will seek out situations and people who will continue to find him or her special and who will continue to heap praise and adoration upon him or her. However, in the real world, not everyone will find him or her adorable. Or, the Mascot may find him or herself in competition with other Mascots from other families. And be rejected (in Hollywood, for example) and be devastated.



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The other Distracter is the Clown. I believe that many of the great comedians of our and previous times were Clowns in their families. There are some comedians who have a very positive and wholesome energy (my favorite, Bill Cosby is such a comedian). However, there are many other comedians who despite their great talent... their great wit... their great success in status and monetarily, have a very deep dark and painful energy that shows through the laughter and humor. I believe that as children in painfully dysfunctional families, that yes... they had the intelligence and the wit to be funny, but more than that, they had to be funny. They had to be funny to distract the family from the intensity of the pain that it suffered because of the dysfunctionality of the family due to alcoholism, drugs, and/or other craziness. And despite their later success as comedians, the deep dark inner pain still eats at them. As in all of these roles, the Distracter Clown can serve the family or the system. There are often times when a classroom, meeting, or workplace has had its level of tension rise to an unbearable level and when the release of tension because of a well-spoken joke or wisecrack is greatly welcome. On the other hand, the Clown will keep on making wisecracks even when it is not welcome or needed.

THE REBEL

Then there are the Scapegoats... the Rebels... the Bad Ones. Each and every one of the other roles, except for the Lost Child functions to save the family from its pain. The Hero and the Nurturer try to save the family by taking care of the functional needs and the emotional needs, both as prevention and also as repair. The two Distracters: the Mascot and the Clown try to save the family by pulling their attention away from the dysfunction and pain with adorable behavior or with humor. The Lost Child, on the other hand doesn't try to save the family; he or she has quit and is just waiting his or her time until he or she can get out of there. The Rebel tries to save the family from its pain by acting out... by being bad... by failing. Despite the efforts of the other members of the family system, eventually in a dysfunctional family a crisis will inevitably arise. The checks start bouncing. Child Protective Services shows up. The heat gets turned off. Someone gets fired. The parents who have been avoiding trying to be a couple, are forced to deal with their issues... and they do it extremely poorly. As they do it extremely poorly... as they fight... as they get more and more intense and it gets scarier and scarier for the children, the children begin to fear that the family will self-destruct. Each of them except for the Lost Child, will activate in their roles to do the best they can to save the family: the Hero takes care of the household so there won't be any dirty dishes for the couple to fight over, the Nurturer nurtures so the distress of a child does not add to the distress of the couple, the Mascot shines and the Clown tells jokes to draw the attention away from the battle, and the Rebel finds some cat to light on fire, or begins to get into fights at school, or starts to fail in school, or becomes defiant at home. The Rebel creates an alternative crisis. This alternative crisis draws the couple from the fundamental crisis of their not knowing how to be a couple! Allows them to stop being a couple, and forces them to take the new role of being... parents! They show up together at school to meet with the teacher. To figure out why the Rebel is acting out. To work out a plan to "help" him or her out. With their attention now focused on the Rebel, the implicit danger that the family will fall apart because of their incompatibility as a couple goes away. All the children relax. The family has been saved. Unfortunately, the Rebel's reputation is destroyed in this process, and his or her self-esteem is also diminished. The Rebel feels compelled to taking one for the family. Then as the crisis fades (the Rebel's behavior improves), the parents go back to being a couple (a lousy couple), and the tension increases again. When it reaches the crisis point again, the Rebel has to go look for another cat... or if he or she is older act out with drugs or alcohol, or sexual behavior, or delinquent behavior. Or, it is another child's turn to be the Rebel. Or, the Rebel may get it. Get what the Lost Child



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figured out a long time ago -- that there was nothing he or she could really do to make things better. And, the Rebel may say "The heck with this, I am outa here!" Unfortunately, just like the other children's roles, the Rebel may continue with his personality and this behavior pattern throughout his or her life.

BALANCING THE INNER HERO, NURTURER, LOST CHILD, DISTRACTERS- MASCOT & CLOWN, & REBEL

These roles, in of themselves are not negative per se. The Clown at the right time, like the Hero and the Nurturer can be a very positive element in the system. The danger occurs when the need to perform the role is constant and without discrimination. The Hero always fixes and the Nurturer always nurtures whether or not there is anything that needs to be fixed or nurturer. And, the Clown just won't shut up! Just won't stop making the jokes or the wisecracks even if they are disruptive or rude. Sometimes, is even best to be quiet and invisible like the Lost Child. Sometimes the better part of discretion is to recognize that it would not be beneficial to anyone to confront and issue or person at a given time. While the Rebel seems to always get into trouble, his or her energy is also very strong. The Rebel is the one who is most likely to fight back... to refuse to accept the status quo, including that he or she is the bad one. And in the dysfunctional family, the status quo sucks! There are many times in life when it is important to be assertive and to speak out rather than to be passive and to accept how things are. In society, Rebels often provide the impetus for important social change. Each of these roles in balance can be part of an overall healthy personality. The ability to choose which of these roles is appropriate at a given time results in a healthy personality and successful social interaction and relationships. These roles become dysfunctional when the individual no longer has the ability to discriminate when the role is appropriate, and when the individual no longer has access to the different roles.

Does your child get stuck into one of these roles? Were you stuck in one of these roles as a child? Are you still stuck in one of these roles? In some dysfunctional (and functional!) families, the children rotate through these roles -- each taking a turn as the Hero or Nurturer and then even becoming a Rebel at some point for instance. If you noticed your child is rotating through these roles, it may be a good thing! Even if that means he or she is a Rebel sometimes! As your child is rotating through these roles, you need to support him or her in all of them. But also to help him or her recognize both the positive and the negative consequences of being in and especially, staying in the role without the freedom to move to another role. If on the other hand, your child seems to stay in a role including the ostensibly "good" roles of Hero or Nurturer, then it is important to examine the overall family dynamics and family system to see if their role serves the family at cost to their own individual emotional and psychological health. Disciplining for behavior that comes from these roles can orient to specifically changing the behavior, but will not address the underlying issues that may be causing both the roles and the behavior. When parents query me about or bring their children to me for therapy, I am very straightforward in asking them how they are doing as a couple and how they are doing overall as a family. They may not realize it, but the children's so-called "bad" behavior may be their attempt to "save" their family from its pain. Then it becomes important to find out what the family needs to be "saved" from.



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Chapter 12

THE UNOFFERED CHOICE CHOOSING TO BE REASONABLE VS. UNREASONABLE

Okay, before dinner, you decide what to do. We're going to eat at six o'clock and you have a lot to do. Just make sure you do everything you're supposed to do before dinnertime. You can

a) do your chores first, do your homework next, practice your piano and then play video games, or

b) do your homework first, practice your piano, do your chores next, and then go out to play with your friends, or

c) finish your piano practice and do your chores, do your homework next, and then watch TV, or

d) make sure you finish your chores, your homework, and do your piano practice before you go play around.

Any of these choices are okay for me. You just need to take care of your responsibilities before you start to fool around. So, what do you want to do?

I choose e) to watch some TV first, then go out and play with my friends, and then to play video games!

Hey!! That wasn't one of the choices! You're not going to get to go out this weekend.

Whaat!?! That's not fair!

A MULTIPLE-CHOICE WORLD

Somehow, in a multiple-choice world, some children seem to always choose the choice that is not on the list. As a parent or adult, we offer children a series of reasonable choices that we come up from our experiences in life that offer both decent options and are respectful of the child's needs and desires. Unfortunately, children often fail to realize that these are decent options and that we have been respectful of their needs and desires. Their focus is often on the here and now and for immediate gratification. They choose "e" when that choice is inappropriate in the larger context of discipline and personality development. We wish for children to learn how to be responsible, so we encourage and require them to take care of their responsibilities to the household, to their schoolwork, and to others. However, many children experience this as ignoring their own needs. And so they choose "e." As adults, we often have our own form of choosing "e" despite it not been on the "list" of choices. Instead of choosing a) forgoing the trinket or treat as unnecessary; b) waiting to buy it when there are more discretionary funds; c) looking or waiting to find it at a better price; d) adapting what one already has to fill the need. All such choices are prudent given limited income and other more demanding financial needs. Unfortunately, we often choose "e" because our desire or cravings become too compelling, and then we also pay the price later on with credit card debt. Sometimes the choices are not having dessert, having a less fattening dessert, taking a very small portion, or sharing the dessert with someone else. And then there's "e"... again!



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GOOD CHOICES AND POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES- REWARDS

In simple terms, a person can make positive choices or negative choices. Of course, we want to encourage children to make good choices. One way to encourage children to make positive choices is to give them positive consequences or rewards for the good choices. Sometimes adults forget to do this. Since the expectation is for a child to make good choices, some people have a philosophy (or take it for granted) that since these choices are what the child should do, that a child should not be rewarded for what is expected. In working with parents and teachers, often the ideal of a reward system comes up to help motivate children to make good choices in their families, school, or lives. A common complaint is that if the children or rewards for doing what they are supposed to do, then they won't do anything unless is a reward. There is some relevance to this concern. Parents who reward profusely do run this risk. Constant toy, trinket, activity, or money rewards tend to focus the child on the gathering of the rewards rather than on the appropriateness of the behaviors. On the other hand, if the parents emphasize that the positive behaviors are what's important... that the child is being a "good" kid... that the positive choice and the positive behaviors are pleasing to the adult, then the verbal reward or praise becomes prominent, eventually leading to a sense of self-satisfaction and fulfillment in maintaining the self-identity he or she has internalized. I have discussed this in more depth in my series on self-esteem archived on this web site.

Material (nonverbal) rewards can be appropriate if they are occasional and clearly presented as symbolic of the appreciation of adults for the good choice and behaviors by the child. When my daughter was being toilet trained, we started to give her M&M candies whenever she used her little potty chair. We quickly realized that this could be creating a problem in making candy the reward. We switched over to little stickers (we found a roll of My Little Ponies stickers which were very popular at the time) that she enjoyed. Each time she used the little potty chair, we with give her a little sticker, which she would take into her room and stick on her kitty poster. Within a very short time, however, she began to forgot to ask for her sticker rewards. In addition to the stickers, she also got one or both parents very enthusiastically praising her for her efforts and success at using a potty chair. It is important to note that our praise was not simply praise for her. If it were merely praise for her behavior, then it is possible that she would become dependent upon praise. Without praise as a reward, then why should she continue to make these choices? There are individuals (not just children, but often the adults) who will not do their work -- fulfill their responsibilities unless there is an obvious tangible reward. In the same vein, there are individuals who will not do their work nor fulfill their responsibilities unless someone is there to praise them for it. They have no internalized sense of self-praise... self-acknowledgment or self-appreciation. Praising our daughter's behavior or choice is not the same as praising her character, values, and identity that led to the behavior or choice. Her sense of accomplishment and satisfaction was created by our enthusiastic and profuse appreciation of her... not just of her behavior or choice. Her feeling good about who she was... about who she was becoming (a big girl) became the true rewarding element. From a developmental perspective, is very important to note that there was no negative choice possible in this situation for her. She was at the point in her development that it was possible for her to become toilet trained, but not essential nor late necessarily.

ATTENTION, APPRECIATION, & MATERIAL REWARDS

It is critical that when a child makes a good choice -- a positive choice, that he or she very consistently (especially in the formative years of early childhood) receives a positive



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consequence. The pleasure or appreciation of the important adults in his or her life is the normal positive consequence. A few years ago I worked with a family where one of the children was acting out with a lot of aggression. It turned out that one of the major issues in the family was that fulfill the parents or so of the sort that in their jobs and other social demands, that they were inadvertently unaware and unappreciative other children's personalities, needs, and accomplishments. The child that was acting out was actually demanding that they notice him. When he behaved, they did not notice him. When he acted out or presented a crisis, then they noticed him. The attention that they gave him was negative attention -- anger and punishments, but to him it was a rewarding attention nevertheless. As we were able to identify this dynamic, we were able to break the negative cycle. As the parents learned to notice and attend to him for both positive and simple things, he no longer had to act out in order to get rewarded with attention. Material rewards are less important. Material rewards, however, are often easier for adults to present. They are more concrete and tangible than being consistently aware of your child and consistently sending them positive messages and presenting positive models of behavior. Many parents are driven by the demands of surviving in our society economically (or of following societal expectations) and are aware that they are not giving their children attention that they need. To compensate for this deficit and two soothe their own guilt, they provide frequent and even extravagant material rewards to the children. When children receive material rewards in lieu of attention and appreciation (what some people would call "loving attention") they can become acclimated to desiring, expecting, and seeking the material rewards. In effect, they decide to get what they can get -- material rewards, because of what they can't get -- parental attention and appreciation.

When our oldest daughter finished her first grading period in high school, we noted that she had done extremely well. She had done well because of her own sense of excellence, her work ethic, and the skills that she had acquired and developed over the years (with the help of the teachers and parental support). We were very pleased and praised her for her efforts and for her accomplishments. We directed her to appreciate herself. We also decided to reward her financially for her grades. She had accomplished these grades without the financial reward in front of her. The financial reward was symbolic of our appreciation. And, it made it all a little bit more fun. It became a part of her (and later on, her sister's) academic reward system while in high school. This type of reward can be appropriate, but by itself it often falls flat unless there is an ongoing system of appreciation and attention for all the period of time leading up to the and results. This meant, our noticing and commenting positively on her work ethic and work effort during the school year. Even more so, there needed to have been ongoing system of appreciation and attention in the early years when young children need it the most. If parental appreciation and attention is internalized, the maturing child becomes more and more self-sufficient in giving him or herself the praise and support needed. As this develops, parental attention and appreciation becomes more supplementary and helping to maintain rather than to create the confidence and identity of a good person. On a practical level, it is impossible for a parent to be constantly present to praise his or her child each and every time they make positive and productive choices. Only if the child has internalized such values and has an expectation of performing up to these values, and then is able to praise (or at least self-acknowledge) him or herself for following through, can the "reward system" be successful.



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ESSENTIAL SUFFERING: CONSEQUENCES OF POOR CHOICES

On the other hand, a child makes a poor or negative choice is just as essential that they receive a negative consequence. Children (and adults) do not learn that negative choices lead to negative consequences unless parents (or authoritative and responsible supervisors) ensure that they receive a negative consequence when they make that poor choice. Sometimes adults will "forgive" or make excuses for the behavior and subvert or prevent the natural negative consequences that should follow. There will always be some mitigating circumstances... some consideration for effort... some consideration for motivation... and some consideration for using the circumstances to teach and for the children to learn. However the real world is not forgiving like loving parents. Letting children suffer the consequences of negative choices is important for them to learn about the cause and effect process and their own power and control... and responsibility in the world. Can you stand to see your child sad in not having the dessert he or she didn't earn for not eating their vegetables? Can you stand to experience your child disappointment in not getting to go to the dance because he or she spent the money for it last week? Can you leave your child behind to take care of chores should have been taken care of already? Can you let your child suffer? Being able to let your child suffer his or her natural consequences of poor choices is important to his learning about the realities of the real world. This is not the same as creating artificial punitive and draconian experiences to make your child suffer. The real world also doesn't normally severely punish artificially. If you present harshness that is not reflected in the actual communities your child will live in, you lose your credibility.

BEING REASONABLE... BEING UNREASONABLE

Good choices and positive consequences. Poor choices and negative consequences. Unfortunately, some children want to make good choices and get positive consequences AND make poor choices and avoid negative consequences AND still get positive consequences. That is unreasonable and totally unrealistic (except with insecure and indulging parents). In that sense, the choice isn't between making good choices and getting positive consequences versus making poor choices and getting negative consequences. The true choice is between being reasonable and being unreasonable. Being reasonable is understanding that good choices normally lead to positive consequences, and that poor choices normally lead to negative consequences. Being reasonable is accepting the natural consequences of both types of choices. Being unreasonable is expecting and demanding positive consequences despite poor choices. It is critical to teach your children to be reasonable. Unreasonable people make unreasonable demands upon others and upon society. Unreasonable people are rude and hurtful, yet still expect to be welcomed and included. Unreasonable people are inconsistent and irresponsible, yet still expect to be given another opportunity. Unreasonable people fail to get education, experience, and education, yet blame favoritism and "bad luck" on their lack of success. Unreasonable people get punished their entire lives for their unreasonable behavior, values and beliefs, and expectations. When the parent in the vignette at the beginning of this article presented four reasonable options (reasonable, because they require the child fulfilling appropriate responsibilities, before indulging in recreational activities), he or she was prompting the child to be reasonable. By choosing the unoffered option "e" -- to play without having done chores, homework or piano practice, the child was choosing to be unreasonable. Parents who wish their children to be successful and functional adults (much less, successful and functional students) must not allow their children the choice to be unreasonable. As long as parents themselves, offer choices that are reasonable and are available to reasonable alternatives presented by their children, they can hold firm to the demand of being reasonable. When and if a child chooses to be unreasonable, and insists on staying unreasonable after being



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prompted to make a reasonable choice or to offer a reasonable alternative, then it is absently incumbent upon the parent that the child should suffer a negative consequence. Option "f" then is presented.

f) choose from options "a", "b", "c", or "d". Your option "e" is unacceptable. Choose from options "a", "b", "c", or "d" or be grounded for this week and the weekend as well (or some other appropriate negative consequence).

In addition, are you a reasonable parent? Or, are you an unreasonable parent? A reasonable parent presents a model of reasonable behavior. A reasonable parent is sensitive and attentive and appreciative of his or her child. A reasonable parent is consistent. A reasonable parent understands that his or her good choices will normally lead to positive consequences and that his or her poor choices will normally lead to negative consequences -- including his or her good or poor choices about parenting and discipline. An unreasonable parent ignores how his or her model of behavior influences the child, is inconsistent, and has unreasonable expectations of positive behavior despite a litany of poor choices in life and parenting. The reasonable parent is rewarded by the wonderful child and adult that he or she has helped raise. The unreasonable parent will wonder why... blame... or hold shame. In the Handouts section of this website is a mini-poster titled "On Unreasonable People" that also addresses some of these issues. There will be times when a more formal and organized reward system can be useful with the child and family. The next chapter will discuss the principles and specifics of reward systems.



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Chapter 13

INCENTIVE BASED BEHAVIORAL MODIFICATION PROGRAM

Maybe if I give her something, she'll behave better. But if I give her something to go to school, then maybe she won't go anymore unless I keep on giving her something. But she's not behaving now, so what's to lose? My dad doesn't think you should get rewarded for something you're supposed to do anyway. When I got straight A's, I didn't get anything for them. I was expected to get straight A's. In fact, when I got a B that time, I got yelled at. Maybe if I ground her, she'll behave better. But when I ground her, she gets even angrier and fights with me even more. She doesn't seem to care how many privileges I take away. She just gives me that dirty look and goes hides in her room. And, there's no way I can get her a new car like Sarah did for her daughter when she got good grades. Shoot... I'd be happy if she went to school! She wants a car... maybe I can get her grandfather's car that he's not using anymore. She promised that she would get good grades if I got her a car. But once she gets a car, she probably won't go to school anyway. "I'll gladly pay you Thursday for a hamburger today." Isn't that what Wimpy used to tell Popeye all the time? What am I to do?

Many times, when I am working with either parents or teachers I mention that an incentive program can be beneficial in helping motivate children. Their response of that is, "A reward system? We've tried that and it doesn't work." My response normally is, "You didn't do it correctly!" People often have tried reward programs and had very poor results from them. Yet, among the most basic principles about human behavior is that when people are motivated by potential rewards, they are much more likely to change their behavior. Pavlov and his famous dog that salivated at the ring of a bell are well known to many people. Maybe we are not Pavlov and our children are not dogs! However, positive and negative reinforcement, conditioned response, unconditioned response, and reward and punishments are all concepts that whether or not we are conscious of them, are constantly used in our relationships. Unfortunately, what most people call a reward system often ends up being a punishment system. Instead of motivating children to behave more appropriately, a poorly designed reward system that focuses on punishment ends up causing them to be unmotivated.

IMMUNITY TO PUNISHMENT

In fact, punishment as the foundation for discipline can backfire. Often in my work with teenagers and their parents, I will tell the teenager, "I bet that you're immune to punishment." Their initial response is often of slight confusion or surprise. When I continue, "You are so used to being punished... your parents punish you so often... that you've become immune to punishment!" They often burst out in laughter when they recognize the truth to this, "Yeah... I'm immune to punishment!" Sometimes, parents will continue to punish the children in order to motivate them to change their behavior even though the punishment is clearly ineffective. Although it is ineffective, because they are frustrated... because they don't know what else to do, they continue to punish and punish ever more severely. This happened with the parents of a teenage boy. He had many challenges academically and had become increasingly disillusioned about school. The conflict between him and his parents became more severe and entered into a cycle of greater and greater negativity. His parents tried to motivate him by punishing him whenever he did things that were inappropriate in their eyes. This failed to work but they didn't know what else to do. So they continued just to punish him. Over the years, he had developed



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an immunity to punishment. One night, he had not come home by his 11 p.m. curfew. His mother began to worry about him. She waited for a call- none came. She tried to call him on his cell phone- he didn't answer. For the next four hours, she alternated between being terrified that something horrible had happened to him and being furious that he wasn't home or hadn't contacted her. She went to bed but couldn't sleep. She spent the early morning hours listening carefully for a sound of a car... of her son coming home. She lay hoping for a reassuring phone call from him and terrified that another kind of phone call might come. Finally, about 3 AM, he came stumbling into the house. She came out of her bedroom. Before she could speak, he mumbled to her as he brushed past toward his bedroom, "Yeah yeah, I know I'm late. I'm really tired... I got to go to sleep. Just tell me what my punishment is tomorrow." She was stunned and flabbergasted as he stepped into his bedroom and shut the door. She was shocked... and she was all ready to be mad and didn't get to be mad! Her son's immunity to punishment had disabled her. In fact, he knew that he was going to get punished for staying out later than his curfew. However, he had been willing to accept the punishment because he wanted to stay out late. He was immune to punishment.

Since punishment had become the only way that she had to discipline him, the only thing that she could do was to try to punish him even more severely. She had followed this pattern over and over throughout his childhood. Intensification-the intensifying of what has already been tried is often the normal reaction to failure. When pushing doesn't work, sometimes pushing harder does work. When yelling doesn't work, sometimes yelling louder may work. However, when pushing doesn't work and pushing harder doesn't work, often shoving, kicking, and slamming still won't work. When yelling doesn't work and yelling louder doesn't work, often screaming with eyes bulging and veins popping still doesn't work. In addition, the danger of intensification when it comes to punishment and discipline is that it can lead to abusive behavior. If a spank is supposed to motivate someone to change their behavior and yet, it is not enough to motivate change, then intensification suggests more spanks. If a slight sting on the bottom from a spank, isn't enough to motivate someone, then intensification suggests hitting harder or more times or more often will cause a greater hurt that will motivate. And if that still doesn't work, inflicting great pain and suffering becomes the next step. This is why it is so important to have greater clarity about the principles of discipline and the various techniques that may be utilized.

Sometimes parents or teachers come to me to ask for help when they have gotten stuck with dealing with challenging children. They say that they realize that what they're doing isn't working and they want suggestions about something different they can do. They may even admit that they now understand that nagging, intimidating, and grinding the children doesn't work. So they asked me for a new, improved, and different way to nag, intimidate and grind the children into better or different behavior! The key is to do something differently! Ironically, the suggestion of a behavioral incentive plan-or reward plan is often not seen as something different, but what has been tried and has failed previously. Looking at what an incentive plan is about may help people understand that this kind of approach is different.

KEY ISSUES & THE DILEMMA

Many people in general are seeking greater control in their own lives as a means of dealing with the **lack of power and control** they otherwise feel in their own families, school, and the community. Children who become oppositional often want greater power and control in their lives. Anything that allows them (or us) to have greater power and control or a sense of greater



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power of and control in their lives (for us, such as being effective parents!) is highly motivating. The issue for adults is to instill the discipline that they exercise power and control in appropriate ways that are not violating of other people's rights. In addition, many oppositional behaviors are **attempts to get validation** (not just attention) from adults. Validating experiences confirm to the individual that they have value as human beings. The parents and family of oppositional children, for various reasons, are often **ineffective** at giving appropriate validation and attention. They may lack sufficient skills at nurturing a sense of worth of their children. Or, they may be so overwhelmed with stress dealing with the demands of their lives, that they barely keep their own heads above water and can only marginal support to their children. Such adults usually **feel out of control themselves** (and not just with their oppositional children). Obviously, there's nothing to highlight your own sense of being out of control more than not being able to control your own snotty kids! In addition, if you feel out of control about your finances, your job situation, your prospects, your weight, and so forth, you're dang sure a whole less likely to put up with any guff from your kids! As a result, not surprisingly oppositional children and their parents (or teachers) often end up in a **power struggle** where both lose. **Punishment** usually has become the mode of discipline despite its ineffectiveness. Quite often, punishment was the main, if not the only form of discipline that many parents experienced from their own parents when they were children. Interestingly, many parents will admit that punishment was not effective to motivate them to behave as children either!

PLACATING, CONFLICT, AND ANGER

As parents and children get caught up in the power struggle and parents punish more often and more intensely and children get more defiant and sullen, the battles become uglier and more painful. Children (or adults, by the way) don't have to keep throwing tantrums in order to intimidate other people. Once the trauma of dealing with a tantrum has occurred, the tantrum or any subsequent tantrum becomes intimidating. At that point, the very threat of another tantrum will often suffice to intimidate. As the situation begins to escalate... as the child begins to escalate, the adult's anxiety also escalates. Sometimes, the adult is ready to battle... unfortunately, to battle poorly and the feel frustrated and inadequate as a parent. Other times, depending on mood or energy, **placating** the child often seems to be come the only alternative to avoid **conflict**. Unfortunately, placating only gets the adult out of the present situation, and worse, reinforces the child's negative behavior for future conflicts. In addition, to the lack of an authoritative response... the failure to assert boundaries, often causes and insecurity in the children. Children are supposed to test boundaries and are reassured when boundaries are clear, firm, consistent and fair. Placating the child sometimes is not consistent and certainly not firm. Not knowing what will happen each time lacks clarity and is not fair.

Parents recognize their futility and feel more and more inadequate. **Anger (and its close relative, resentment)** usually becomes the predominant emotion, sabotaging the relationship. Children are angry at parents for being inconsistent and unfair... angry at not getting things... angry that they got it last time! Parents are angry that the children are angry... angry at the unreasonableness... angry at themselves for being failures... angry at themselves for repeating the behavior of their parents. And it goes around and around and they can't seem to stop.

PRINCIPLES & GOALS

An effective reward system will seek to:

Create real (and appropriate) **power and control** for both children and parents.



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Create means for the child to get **validation**.

Defuse the power struggle and create the "**Win, Win**" situation.

Remove punishment as a mode of discipline and replace with **reinforcement/reward** principles.

Remove conflict from the relationship and replace with **contracts**.

Remove anger as relevant to the relationship.

Many behavioral incentive plans include both rewards and punishments. Life is about both rewards and punishments. Many families have effective behavioral incentive plans that include both rewards and punishments. If you already have such a plan-an effective plan that is, then you should maintain it or perhaps only tweak it to improve it (but if you had an effective plan, you wouldn't need this article!). However, many families cannot institute an effective behavioral incentive plan with both rewards and punishments, because they have already taught their children to be immune to punishments. And/or, have intensified their punishments to a degree where they have become unfair and hurtful, and/or become highly inconsistent with their administration of punishments and the degree of punishment. In such situations, the behavioral incentive plan must be a reward-only behavioral plan. Absolutely no punishments. Absolutely no penalizing children by removing already earned rewards- or making up new punishments. Removing already gained rewards or "points" serve to discourage children from trying. In addition, usually the removal of rewards or points (which is symbolically, if not also functionally, the same as a punishment) occurs when the adult is angry or frustrated about something. The adult removes the rewards or points in response to an unexpected transgression not discussed or included the behavioral incentive plan.

For example, the plan may focus on the morning routines necessary to get out of the house on time. Each element (getting up by a certain time, washing up, getting dressed, eating breakfast, and being prepared to leave- backpack, lunch, etc.) successfully executed gains the child one or more points that he/she accumulates which can be exchanged for some predetermined rewards (extra TV or computer time, video games, ice cream treats, playtime with friends, money, and so forth). I set up such a plan with a father and his son. The child had been successfully following through and earning points throughout the week. He was excited and looking forward to "cashing in" his points for a video game rental. Late in the week, the boy got into an argument with his teacher at school. Dad, furious and embarrassed that his son had argued with the teacher, wiped all of his points off the ledger. Despite doing exactly what they had agreed upon (the morning routine issues), the boy was denied his reward. His son's response was basically, "Screw it! I quit! There's no point in even trying. Dad will make up some other excuse and I won't get any reward... ever!"

A behavioral incentive plan has to be specific. It cannot be a "be a perfect child" plan. It cannot be an "anything else that I might not like" plan. It cannot be an all-inclusive plan. It is critical that it be a practical plan that focuses on a particular relatively confined and concrete area of life. Once one particular area has been stabilized-the behavior has evolved to a more tolerable or acceptable level, then another area can be focused on or perhaps the first area can be expanded. Some people are not satisfied with this approach, since it appears to be working on areas that are too insignificant. They want bigger change in more substantial areas. However, more substantial change may be unrealistic and serves to set up everyone for failure by asking for too much too soon. My experience with simpler and less dramatic approaches is that both the child and the adult cannot be successful with a more complex approach. They both have too much negative energy, too many bad habits, and too little skills. On the other hand, there is a fascinating transfer when there is success in a "simple" behavioral plan into other areas of the child's behavior. Having an



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area of success often breaks the relentless cycle of negativity and failure that had come to define the adult-child relationship. Everyone feels much better about him or herself. On several occasions, the positive energy and sense of accomplishment motivated the child to improve in attitude and respect- in areas that had not addressed specifically in the behavioral plan.

STRATEGIES & PRACTICALITIES:

Define **GOALS** and **REWARDS** as different but related. Goals are defined by parents as behaviors that are productive in short-term and also in the long run. The short-term goals may serve to increase the functionality of the household routines and reduce conflict and increase cooperation (less hassle and less fights!). The longer-term goals are developing attitudes, values, and behaviors that will have positive consequences in the child's personality and life. Parents choose the goals while children are allowed to have input about them. For example, behaviors that make up the morning routine, behaviors that make up a late-night going to bed routine, behaviors involving chores, involving homework and so forth are goals that might be chosen by parents. It is important to choose goals that can be achieved in a concrete manner. The goal of being good or of being respectful, or of not being bad or not disrespectful, while being worthwhile long-term goals, are not concrete enough. The child may be "good" or not fight for virtually the entire day but may misbehave in the last half hour before bedtime, which would disqualify him/her from achieving the goal. Respect is hard to quantify and disrespect can be very subjective. Although, these are the greater goals of discipline, these are too complex for a behavioral incentive plan. **Quantify and define** children's behaviors desired by parents/adults. Avoid subjective definitions of behavior- for example: "Be good- don't be bad", "Be more helpful around the house." Clear definitions of desirable behaviors would be, "Do all your homework before any TV," "Get to school on time or early every day," "If you are going to be half an hour late or more, call and let us know," "Put away your laundry before going to bed," "Do all your chores before you go out to play." Quantify means **yes** or **no**, not "sort of" or "later" or "intend to." Kinda, almost, sort of do not work as quantifiable behaviors. Either a behavior is done or not done. Either a behavior is completed by a certain time or not.

The **ADULT** (through negotiation with the child) **sets the short term, mid-term, and long-term goals**. If a clean room is attractive to him/her (if not a miracle!)...if chores are...if homework is...if school attendance is...if attendance at family functions... The principle is that the goals are meaningful to the adult now, and will have meaning for the child in life as he/she integrates them into his/her lifestyle and expectations. The adult should pick minor **frequency & consistency** behavior goals, more substantial goals, and major goals. For example, the initial goal may be a successful progression through the behaviors of a nighttime routine to being put in bed. The set of behaviors would be made up of taking a bath or shower, washing up, changing into pajamas, laying out the clothes to be worn tomorrow, and being in bed by a certain time. Unfortunately, if the bedtime is 8 p.m., up until 8 p.m. the bath, washing up, pajamas, clothes can be delayed and argued over. Quantify these behaviors and set up reasonable expectations so that there isn't a rush in the last 5 minutes to accomplish what needs a half hour to do, by setting aside deadlines for each of the behaviors. Specifically, the bath has to start by 7 p.m. and be done by 7:30 p.m. If it is done by 7:30 p.m., then the child is credited with achieving the goal and gains a point. If the child is not done by 7:30 p.m.... in other words, is done at 7:31 p.m., then he says she has failed to achieve the goal and does not get credited a point (be merciless!). Yes-no, made it or didn't make it. Washing up and pajamas has to be finished by 7:45 p.m. Yes-no, made it or didn't make it. Clothes chosen and in bed by 8 p.m. Yes-no, made it or didn't make it. If the child achieves some of the goals,



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then he/she gains some of the points. If the job achieves all of the goals, then he/she gains all of the points plus a bonus (to be discussed later). If this plan motivates the child to improve the evening routine, he/she will also be developing habits that will benefit him/her in the long-term. Once this goal has been stable, then another goal- a more substantial goal may be set. An extension of the bedtime routine to include all the after school activities and chores may be an appropriate new goal. Or, homework may be isolated as a goal in of itself.

Punishments are not a part of this plan. Goals are behaviors that must occur in frequently and consistently, that once achieved result in rewards. Never take away any achieved "points." In this plan, children never lose credit for achieved goals for misbehavior. Misbehavior results in the lack of progress toward goals (and resultant rewards), but does not discredit the children's positive behavior. This avoids the focus on punishment. The negative consequence of not following through on the positive behaviors is that the goals will be achieved slowly rather than quickly and the rewards will be slow to come. The positive consequence of following through is that the goals will be achieved quickly and the rewards gained quickly... and often. Parents picked the goals because of their insight about how the household routines will benefit future life success for children. On the other hand, children are best at telling adults what motivates them now! The **CHILD** (through negotiation with the adult), **chooses his/her own rewards**. If toys are attractive to him/her...if money is...if privileges...if video games...if excursions... The principle is that these rewards have to be meaningful to the child- not to the adult. The child should be encouraged and led to minor, more substantial, and major rewards. When I worked out an incentive plan once with a father, he decided that the rewards should be books, "because books are good for him." Books would have been okay as the reward if books were rewarding to his son. Unfortunately, they were not rewarding to him. He liked Pokémon cards! We presented this plan to his son by saying, "We have figured out a way for you to get on a whole bunch of Pokémon cards. Do you want to do that?" Boy, was he excited! With Pokémon cards as the award, he found that his son was highly motivated and met the behavioral goals readily. Another way to present such a plan is to ask, "Would you be interested in a way to get a lot of the things that you want? And be in control of how fast you get them?"

Rewards have to be age-appropriate and tailored to the individual child. Parents have to put boundaries on the rewards. They need to be reasonable and not extravagant... and also within the budget of the family. Another family attempted to motivate their son into bathing regularly by promising him a new bicycle if he bathed daily for a week. This was far too extravagant a reward for too simple a series of behaviors. If that was all it took to get a new bicycle, imagine the growing demands he would make for other behavior such as doing homework and getting up in the morning. What was worse, was that they gave him the bicycle after only three days. Of course, after he got the bicycle, he stopped bathing again. They sabotaged their own incentive plan.

OCCURRENCE, FREQUENCY, CONSISTENCY, AND BONUSES

More substantial and major behavioral goals should be matched up with **bonus rewards**- such as more money, more points to redeem, or a special excursion, privilege, or present. For example, each accomplishment- each completed behavior results in one point credited. If all of the behaviors in the set are completed, then there should be bonus points awarded. A certain number of points are gained when the set of behaviors is completed for one day. For a series of days and weeks of successful completion of behaviors, then an even greater bonus should be rewarded. This is based on the principle that each **occurrence** deserves some credit, but greater **frequency**



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deserves even greater credit, and **consistency** of positive behaviors deserves the highest reward. Some people feel the whole idea of rewards has being artificial and inappropriate since the real world doesn't reward you when you just do what you're supposed to do. Quite the contrary, a well-designed behavioral incentive plan does reflect the real world! For example, each time you go to work and do a good job- an **occurrence**, you get some pay. However, if you go to work and do a good job **frequently**, you will get more pay and raises in pay. On top of that, if you go to work and do a good job **consistently**, then you will get not only raises but promotions as well. A well-designed behavioral incentive plan becomes a model for habits and values that will promote success in the adult and vocational world.

Once the adult and the child agree on the rewards and goals, then a **CONTRACT** can be made (writing it up and having it signed may be useful). With the contract, the adult does not need to be angry at the child or punish him/her; the adult only has to adhere to his/her part of the contract. The adult can be honestly regretful that the child has not completed his/her set of behaviors... the adult can be honestly regretful that the child will not receive the rewards that the child had selected. Often, anger from adults is used to punish the child. Unfortunately, anger often distracts the child from his/her responsibility in not completing the behaviors and gaining the rewards. If the child holds up his/her end, then he/she accumulates the points, achieves the goals, and gets the rewards. If he/she doesn't, then he/she doesn't! Whether or not the child achieves the goals well or poorly, the behavioral incentive plan is reflecting how the real world works. Initial indifferent success does not mean the plan has failed. Getting angry at the failure of the child to wholeheartedly embrace the plan is counterproductive and unnecessary. Expect him/her to fail initially and save yourself the anger! The plan will give the child the appropriate feedback depending on what he/she does. Failure to follow through will not be rewarded. Mediocre achievement will be rewarded in a mediocre manner. Exceptional compliance or achievement will be rewarded exceptionally. The adult has to do nothing, except to follow through as the contract had been established. And, to not sabotage the contract. Sabotaging the contract, would be finding ways to save the child from getting the consequences of not behaving (no points, no goals, no rewards). Oppositional children can be very manipulative and tend to be experts at getting adults to change the contract to save them from the choices they have made. **DON'T DO IT!** If the adult "saves" the child from his/her choice, the adult effectively undermines him/herself and any possibility of the child learning a sense of responsibility. Sabotaging the contract would also happen if the parent brings in some violation of some new condition that has not been previously discussed, and takes away previously earned points or rewards.

This plan can be very effective, but it depends primarily on adult following through (so don't mess up!). In addition, not all children are oppositional because of their need for power and control. Sometimes, they are oppositional because of the adult's controlling behavior. And, sometimes, they are oppositional because of profoundly adverse family issues. A behavioral incentive plan is part of a larger process of discipline. It normally will not work in of itself. Sometimes, it is just the tool to shift the balance of negativity that has existed for years within families. Sometimes it is part of a larger approach. If you are going to use a behavioral incentive plan, it is critical that you understand the underlying principles and use them correctly in designing it. Most behavioral incentive plans fail because people do not understand the underlying principles and subsequently, fail to design them correctly. Good luck!



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On my web site at www.RonaldMah.com if you use the link to Handouts, under the section on "Understanding Children and Discipline" is a link to the file "Incentive Based Behavioral Modification Program for Children." In the file is an example of a behavioral incentive plan with the goals and the rewards for minor to major accomplishments, as well as a briefer summary of the major principles discussed here.



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Chapter 14

THE DEFAULT CONSEQUENCE

Mom, a single mother came home after work and finds her 14-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son sitting quietly in the living room and reading books. Something is clearly wrong! Watching TV, in an argument, playing video games, listening to very loud music, and so forth would be normal. Doing what they are supposed to be doing -- that's not normal! She asked, "What's up?" "Nothing," says one. "Nuthin'," says the other. Fortunately, they haven't learned how to be good liars yet. Mom looked around. Everything looks OK. She walked toward the kitchen. There's a funny smell. It's coming from the kitchen -- it's a burnt smell. Something had been burning. She asked Matt and Annabel what happened. "Nothing," says one. "Nuthin'," says the other. Mom isn't that stupid! It took a bit of time, but more gradually came out.

First, Annabel lied saying she dropped some egg on the stove and it burned while she was cooking. When Mom asked Matt, if that was what had happened, Matt with a quick wide-eyed look at Annabel before answered, "Yes." Matt really doesn't know how to lie well! Taking a cue from NYPD Blue and Crime and Punishment (her favorite shows!), Mom worked on the weaker link. Eventually, Matt fessed up -- Annabel had been playing around with the houseplants. She had taken leaves and burnt them on the stovetop. She had threatened him to get him to stay quiet. However, under pressure from Mom and with the golden opportunity to get Annabel into big trouble, Matt sang like a canary. Confronted with the damning testimony of her alibi, Annabel confessed. The evidence was in. Now what?

Mom, not surprisingly was furious. She thought he had gone through all this before with the not playing with fire stuff. If anything, she might have expected it to be still be a problem with the 8-year-old, but not with the 14-year-old. Many times, when a parent is extremely frustrated and angry, he or she will come up with a very severe consequence. The point of a severe consequence is that a negative consequence is to get the attention of the child so that he or she does not do the negative behavior again. If the earlier simpler and less severe consequence didn't get his or her attention, then a truly draconian overwhelmingly severe punishment -- a massacre is needed! Frustration is understandable in dealing with life -- especially in dealing with children. However, making decisions in the midst of intense frustration is not ordinarily when people make the most astute decisions. Outraged, thinking quickly (but not necessarily, thinking clearly), Mom came up with the first thing she could think of that would be severely disappointing and punishing to Annabel. Annabel had been looking forward to spending the weekend with her friend at her friend's grandmother's house. They had been best friends since they were in the third grade up until last year when her friend moved 200 miles away. She was coming to spending a few days with her grandmother, and Annabel and her had arranged for Annabel to visit and stay with her next weekend. There was a whole year of catching up to do. Annabel had been looking for do this for the last two months. Since Mom's instinct was to emphasize how big a deal and how dangerous it was to be playing with fire... since Mom really wanted to get her attention... since she felt that punishment was the only way to get her attention... since she didn't want to beat her... since she was furious... since she didn't know what else to do, Mom told her, "You can't go over to your friend's grandmother's house to visit this weekend!"



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YOU'RE WRONG!

Later in the evening, when grandma (Mom's mother) called, the conversation quickly turned into, "You can't believe what happened today!" And, Mom proceeded to tell her mother the ugly details. When she told her, that she wasn't going to let Annabel visit with her friend next weekend, she was stunned that her mother snapped at her, "You're wrong! That's not fair! That's too much. She's been looking forward to seeing her friend. That's too mean, if you don't let her go." Grandma didn't think that it was an appropriate consequence! Her ally... her confidante... her MOTHER disagreed with her! This, of course turned into an argument between her and her mother. They already had issues between them about parenting, about her been a single Mom, about how supportive (or not) her mother was to her. Fortunately, after the initial surprise with her, they were able to hang in there long enough (get through THEIR issues) for Mom to begin to reconsider whether the consequence was appropriate or inappropriate.

Annabel was way... way... way too old to be playing with fire. It was very scary for the Mom to think that Annabel was out of control. Being a single Mom was hard enough. Being a single Mom of a crazy kid would be too much! Without a doubt, there were deeper issues as to why Annabel at 14 years of age would be playing with fire. Many kids play with fire at some point during their childhood. However, it is usually at a much younger time and a simple boundary and admonition is sufficient to quell the behavior. That Annabel had still experimented with such a thing at her age was alarming. Getting to the bottom of that was essential. However, it is important to remember that in all discipline issues, setting and asserting boundaries is the first step to resolving them. You cannot get a car fixed, until you get it into the garage. You can't get your toddler his or her immunization shots, unless you get him or her into the doctor's office first. You can't get your toddler his or her shots, until you catch them in the doctor's office! Boundaries come first in discipline. Boundaries come before the possibility of growth and change.

UNACCEPTABLE IN THE CONTAINER OF THE RELATIONSHIP

I once worked with a young couple in therapy. They loved each other dearly and wanted to stay together desperately. However, every once in awhile, he would get upset and he would revert to the angry young man of his family and neighborhood. When he got upset, he would say cruel and hurtful things to her. Never would he physically hurt her or physically try to intimidate her. However, still the words would be devastating to her. She would feel betrayed and destabilized. It shook her to core. Afterwards, he would be sincerely contrite, totally apologetic, and would do anything to make amends. It would take a while for her to recover, but his sincere loving and caring for her allowed her trust to build up again. And then, it would happen again, and she would be devastated all over again. And again... and again. She was terrified that this was going to be the pattern of their relationship forever. She tried very hard to look at the good side. And there was a lot to the good side. Other than this one issue, he was a great guy. Other than this one issue, there was nothing that she had any complaints about. Other than being psychologically massacred once in a while, it was all cool. She tried very hard to accept this. She tried very hard to find a way to live with his occasional eruptions. And, as she continued to try, she continued to give permission for him to emotionally destroy her once in a while. She allowed his rage to be within the container -- the boundaries of the relationship. Only when she finally decided that she could not... that she would not live with the fear of and the experience of periodic verbal assaults, did anything change. She finally told him that as much as she loved



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him, that as much as she wanted to be his partner forever, that she could not and would not tolerate this behavior. She set the boundary not to change him, but to protect herself. She asserted that he had to expel this behavior from the container of the relationship or there would not be a relationship. There was a very real possibility that he would not be able to do this, and that they would not be able to stay in a relationship. This is why she had been so reluctant to set this boundary. At one point, she did end the relationship because of his verbal abuse. To his tremendous credit, once this boundary was clearly set and he knew that his behavior was absolutely unacceptable in the container of the relationship -- that she would follow through, he resolved never to explode upon her like this again. As he placed this boundary upon himself, he took the first essential step towards change. Initially, he tried to restrain his rage and explosions through his willpower. That turned out to be insufficient. The depth of his personal issues from his childhood experiences fed the rage within him. These were the deeply painful personal issues that he had tried to avoid dealing with for years. However, because he did dearly love his fiancée and was completely committed to making the relationship work, he chose to face his personal demons. He dealt with these issues successfully. He was able to do so only because he started with the boundary of no violent verbal outbursts. Her boundary set the context that he responded to with the setting of his boundary; both of which eventually lead to growth and change.

Setting a boundary is the first step. However, you must also assert and defend the boundary. When the young woman set her boundary with her fiancée, by itself it was not going to be sufficient. In addition, she was willing to stop talking to him, stop being with him, and to end the relationship. These are not threats that she verbalized -- these were consequences that she was willing to follow through on. With great sadness, she had become willing for him to take the negative choice and evoke the negative consequences. Of course, she preferred for him to take the positive choice and evoke the positive consequences of maintaining the relationship. In this situation between Annabel and her mother, her mother was trying to create a relationship of trust between the two of them where Mom could rely on Annabel making appropriate choices when not under direct supervision. She was willing for Annabel to be mad at her too. In addition, she wanted to facilitate a relationship between Annabel and her own conscience that would manage her behavior appropriately. It was important for her to give Annabel a severe consequence. However, the consequence still needed to be appropriate.

SO, WHAT THEN?

The grandmother didn't like Mom's consequence, thinking that it was too severe, but she didn't offer an alternative either... "So, what then?" In a couple, often one of them puts the other in a bad situation by dropping a very severe consequence on the children that the first one finds unreasonable. The second parent often doesn't want to contradict the first parent, but at the same time finds the consequence unfair. The desire to maintain the alliance with the other parent comes into conflict with the desire to protect their child from unfairness. Then, the second member of the parenting couple puts the first parent into another bad situation by criticizing the first consequence -- saying "No," without offering an alternative to consider. If the second parent finds the consequence too severe, what would be less severe? If it were inappropriate, what would be more appropriate? By the way, in the above example, Annabel's friend would also be punished as Annabel is punished. And, Annabel's friend didn't do anything. Being critical and telling someone that what he or she is doing is incorrect, does not tell him or her what IS correct. In the above situation, when Mom asked her mother was she should do instead,



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grandmamma didn't have an alternative. Mom came to agree that her initial consequence may have been too severe, and certainly Annabel felt that it was too severe as well. Annabel admitted that what she had done was wrong and committed not to do it anymore. However such apologies are cheap when you are busted and want something or want to avoid a punishment. She really wanted to visit with her friend. There were clearly THREE votes against the initial consequence, but still no alternatives.

THE DEFAULT CONSEQUENCE- A WAY OUT

I suggested to the Mom, that she tell Annabel that the consequence as Mom had initially presented still stands, unless Annabel can offer her a better and more appropriate alternative consequence. In other words, she CANNOT go to visit with her friend unless she comes up with an alternative consequence that Mom feels is appropriate. If this were a situation with two parents, then BOTH of them have to accept the alternative or else it won't be acceptable. I warned the Mom to make sure whatever Annabel proposed was concrete and enforceable. This gave Annabel a chance to be responsible. Mom needed to be adamant that she WOULDN'T offer Annabel any alternative consequences. She was not to make it easy for her. Mom would either agree to something or turn them all down. This made Annabel responsible for her behavior AND her consequences. Mom was to be very clear that not being allowed to visit with her friend would still hold, unless she (Annabel) came up with something. If Annabel went dumb on her ("I don't know...")... if she refused to come up with something better... if she just couldn't, then the "default" decision would be enforced- no visit with her friend. Mom was giving her the chance to be reasonable and responsible. In such situations, if the child is used to having the parent come up with the solution, or make a series of offers until the child picked one that he or she is willing to follow through on, it may be very difficult for the child to come up with a reasonable alternative. In addition, the parents need to be aware that promises are not actually alternative consequences. A promise to behave a certain way can easily be forgotten or dismissed when the child has gotten what he or she wants. "I'll gladly pay you Thursday for a hamburger today," promises Wimpy to Popeye. Be sure the alternative consequence that is accepted is one that you as the parent can make it happen. It was critical that Mom didn't cave in! And, Mom had to be absolutely willing to let the default consequence take hold.

Unfortunately, Annabel was not able to come up with a reasonable and appropriate alternative consequence that was acceptable to her mother. She made promises that she could not keep or were too easy to later avoid. Mom didn't fall for these false promises. Then Annabel went "dumb" on her mother and kept responding, "I don't know." Every once in awhile, Mom would prompt her that she was waiting for an alternative proposal. However, as Annabel did not come up with one, Mom did not work hard to come up with proposals. Normally, Mom will work really hard to try to come up with reasonable alternatives -- reasonable alternatives that Annabel would shoot down with derision. Mom could be firm and clear, secure that the default consequence was always there, ready to be enforced. She could also be comfortable with herself because she knew that she was still being available to a reasonable offer. For two weeks, up until the next weekend, her mother was reasonable and receptive to any offer that Annabel may have come up with. Annabel had ample opportunity to be a reasonable person and make a reasonable proposal. As a consequence, come the next Friday, her mom did not feel like a horrible insensitive tyrant of a mother when she enforced the default consequence (they had already notified Annabel's friend, that it was a possibility that the visit would not happen so that she would not be surprised). Annabel did not get to visit with her friend. Very sad. Very sad



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that the two girls did not get to visit. But even sadder and even more alarming, was that Annabel wasn't able to come up with an offer and was unable to be reasonable. That became the focus of the work between Mom and Annabel. As I had said earlier, there were deeper issues. The setting of the boundary -- the reasonable boundaries, and Annabel's failure to stretch and change exposed these deeper issues.

The default consequence gives you something to fall back upon. And, it gives children ample opportunity to become responsible. Even better for some of you, when you have been unreasonable with a punitive consequence, it gives you a way to turn it back around to create a positive learning situation for your child!



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Chapter 15

RIPS, THE FOUR KEYS TO GREAT PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

The situation:

- *a mother in ongoing conflict and distress over the behavior of her 17-year-old son*
- *in therapy with a sullen 5'11" 220 lb. young man with a sweatshirt hood pulled as far over his face as possible*

The approach – RIPS. I say:

- ***R-** it must be hard to hear and feel disrespect from your mother all the time. She doesn't realize how it hurts you. Here's the person that you looked to most of your life for caring and respect, and yet you feel disrespect from her all the time;*
- ***I-** and it seems like she's always puts you down as a stupid teenager -- like you don't know anything. She makes it sound as if you aren't... and can't be a decent human being. That your morals and your values are so screwed up;*
- ***P-** and the stuff she does... it feels like she's always trying to control you with manipulations and threats. She told you all during your childhood that you needed to grow up and eventually make your own choices, but now she tells you your choices are all wrong! It's like you can't make any choices and don't have any power if she could have her way;*
- ***S-** and on top of it all, she seems to be saying that if you don't act "right"... do what she says... be what she wants you to be, that she won't love you any more. That she will reject you and abandon you. I know you're a big guy and maybe believe that you can make it on your own, and maybe you don't believe you need to have her there to back you, but in a perfect world -- in a better world, don't you want to know that she will always be there for you? It's tough, isn't it?*

There are times when the situation gets so out of hand, that a parent does not know what to do. It may happen when the child is very young, or it may happen when the child has become a teenager. The child's behavior has become so severe, that the parent fears for not only the child's future but for his or her present. Children can become very hostile and negative towards parents and other adults if they are not raised properly -- which also means disciplined properly -- which also means guided and supported properly.

Several years ago, I had predicted in the workshops on discipline I presented, that my wife and I would not have any severe parent-adolescent problems with our two children who were in elementary school at the time. I boldly pronounced that we knew what we were doing. That there was a logic to the process of parenting that we were aware of, and although there might be some issues, there would not be the severity of conflict that parents are so fearful of when their children become teenagers. I asserted that children that are loved, supported, and respected do not suddenly become social deviants just because they watched a little MTV or listen to a little bit of hip-hop. They may dress funny! They may pierce parts of the body -- over and over! They may be attuned to music and entertainment that makes your skin crawl and your earwax melt! However, well-loved, supported, and respected children do not suddenly drop all that has been given to them from their parents just because of hormonal changes. Several people who had attended the workshops several years ago when I had so boldly predicted the positive parent-



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adolescent relationship we were to have, have come up to me and asked me, "Well... so how are your kids doing?" with a mischievous glint in their eyes. "I remember you saying that your kids were going to turn out well. So, how are they?" And, my answer would be, "They're great! I told you so!" Not only are both of our children (both girls, one a junior in high school and other a sophomore in college) doing very well, they are both superlative individuals with outstanding character. In all honesty, they are way more mature with way more integrity than I ever had at their ages. In fact, they scare me to death! However, they don't scare me to death because I think they may abuse drugs and alcohol, engage in dysfunctional relationships, indulge in criminal behavior, associate with toxic individuals or causes, or otherwise disrespect others or themselves emotionally, socially, spiritually, or physically. Both of them scare me to death because they have a sense of values, a sense of self, a sense of responsibility to their communities and to society and the world... and worst of all, they have courage and integrity! They scare me to death because when they see that something is not correct, that someone is being abused or harmed... that something is wrong, they often have the courage to speak out and to act (far more courage than I had when I was their age). And that, unfortunately even in our democratic society, can still be dangerous. This does not mean that they are impulsive, judgmental, and intrusive. Being prudent, being respectful, and being practical are still expectations they have of themselves. To speak out and to act when you feel that something is not correct... when someone is being violated is in many ways, the essence of what Americans seek to be. And what we as parents seek to raise our children to be. However, that still scares the heck out of me! And, makes me so proud of them -- and of ourselves as parents. "Oh, you're so lucky that you have such wonderful children!" No, it's not about luck; it's about appropriate parenting.

There are four keys to appropriate parenting -- parenting that does not ensure that your child will obey you, parenting that does not guarantee that your child will be the best academically, parenting that does not guarantee that your child will make the most money, but parenting that does strongly predict, if not guarantee that you will have a child that you can still communicate with in a mutually respectful manner whatever their developmental age or eventual situation. I use the pneumonic, RIPS to remind myself of these four keys. When they were younger, children tended to make moral choices pretty much along the value system that they were given by their important adults: parents and teachers primarily. Pleasing these significant adults is essential to most young children. However, as they reach adolescence, the influence of peers and the peer culture becomes much stronger (especially, among children who have not been able to please overly-critical adults). Counter-balanced against values acquired earlier are newer values reflecting his/her adolescent society. There are four basic themes from the adolescent struggle that help define the adolescent's response to choices in his/her life. These four themes are RESPECT, IDENTITY, POWER & CONTROL, & SECURITY. When any of these themes are activated either positively or negatively, they strongly direct the adolescent towards his/her eventual choice.

RESPECT

In many ways, adolescents do not feel respected by adults: parents and teachers. Adults are always criticizing them as bad, amoral, stupid, and/or strange. Whether they feel invalidated by adults or not, with the rise of the importance of peers, whether or not they are respected by peers becomes more and more important.



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Respected adults (who are usually the adults who adolescents feel gives them respect) are still influential as to the adolescent's choices; their respect of the adolescent's behavior remains important- conversely, their disagreement is also meaningful. However, as teens make choices in life, their perception of their choice being respected or disrespected- accepted or not accepted by the significant peers who they admire or wish to emulate will often be their primary guide, or a primary guide to balance with other and prior influences (such as parents). If they do not feel respected by adults, then peers **will** be the primary guides. If adults are able to constantly convey respect to the teenager, even when they are critical or frightened by the teenager's choices, then the teenager will most probably still be able to consider with adult has to say. If adults are disrespectful, even if they are absolutely correct in their critique of the teenager's choices as being erroneous or dangerous, then the teenager who often be resentful and dismissive of their input.

I work with quite a few teenagers as a therapist. I am extremely confrontive, challenging, and assertive with them. I will disagree sometimes quite emphatically (even profanely!). I will give them my opinions including when I think they are being stupid! (Or when, adults have been stupid). However, I take great care to do it with respect. Honesty is respect. Dishonesty or the dumbing down of information implies that the recipient is unable to understand it, and hence is insulting and disrespectful to the recipient. I respectfully assert my role as an adult with experience and knowledge (and with the wisdom gained from being stupid over many decades and having observed hundreds of people being stupid over decades!). I respectfully assert that they as teenagers, as bright as they maybe, have limited experience and therefore can only have limited wisdom (in other words, they haven't had a chance to be stupid enough often enough to have truly acquired wisdom!). This is more than a technique or some words, it is what I truly believe in. And the teenager's tend to take it very well. The communication is given with respect and taken with respect. They listen to me.

IDENTITY

As adolescents make the transition from being and seeing themselves as children to becoming and defining themselves as adults, they will tend (if conscious of the opportunity) to move toward any behavior or activity that supports their successful identification as an autonomous, competent, and powerful adult. They will, conversely, resist any behavior or activity... and any person that dismisses or her interferes with their identification as adults. At the same time, while adolescents often have insecurities about being immature ("kids"), accusing an adolescent of being immature is experienced as disrespectful- it is not an effective or useful intervention. While adolescents still have a strong instinct to be child-like (playful, desirous of instant gratification), they will behave predictably more "maturely" if they are prompted to be aware of these identity issues. Adults often have problems with this because they still see their teenagers as children. Their caution and vigilance is interpreted as distrust and a message that the teenager is somehow deficient. This is insulting and repels teenagers. Each person has internalized an ideal self who completely lives up to the set of values and morals that he/she believes in. There is also the real self, which is what the person actually does. The more the real self acts and lives up to what the ideal self has defined as good, the better someone feels about him or herself. Parents often attack the teenager's ideal self -- they belittle the values and morality of the adolescent. This **never** works! It serves only to insult the identity of the teenager and destroys the possibility of the teenager being receptive to the person who is insulting him or her. It is important to affirm the identity of the teenager as someone who is wanting and trying to become mature and be successful. It is appropriate to affirm that the struggle



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is difficult and a normal dynamic process that will continue to evolve over time. With this kind of understanding and compassion, the adult will be more likely to be well received by the teenager.

Many times, I will tell teenagers "You're supposed to be trying to figure things out. You're not supposed to have it all figured out! You're supposed to be trying things out. And, you really not supposed to be able to have it right, right away. You're supposed to experiment and explore. And make mistakes. That's what being a teenager or young man or woman is all about. The important thing is to minimize mistakes and to learn from your mistakes. I think you're sharp enough to realize that. And hopefully, you're sharp enough to consider other people's wisdom and experience as you make those choices and those mistakes. Let's look at your plan..." As I confirm their identity as evolving young adults, they tend to feel supported and become willing to have me help them examine their plans... their hopes... their dreams... their relationships... their lives.

POWER & CONTROL

Adolescents, like all individuals are very interested in gaining more power and control in their lives. Unlike children who usually accept their lesser power and control due to adult management, adolescents are often no longer willing to accept lesser power and control due to social considerations. Unlike adults who (hopefully) are secure enough to accept the limitations to their power and control, adolescents often strongly resist any indication or threat of loss to their power and control whether real or imagined. Adolescents may engage in self-defeating and self-harming behavior to maintain their sense of power and control.

While it may seem contradictory that such negative choices seem to be against the desire to affirm a more adult-like identity, being in power and having control is such a fundamental part of the adolescent's identity needs, that "immature" choices that give the illusion of power and control are more predictable over "mature" choices that seem to cause a loss of power and control (especially from an adult perspective and in the long term). Parents who have a long history of ineffective discipline attempts with their teenager will often resort to punishment or manipulation in order to control their child. This control and power domination has the effect of taking away power and control from the teenager, which causes them in turn, to become even more defiant and oppositional. Giving the teenager control and power (which they actually **already** have) within clear boundaries is a more effective approach. Negotiation works best if parents are willing to let the teenager take control of his or her life and take both the positive and negative consequences of his or her choices. Quite often, parents try to force their children into making the "right" choice and avoid the negative consequences of a "wrong" choice. In doing so, they take away power and control from the teenager. For some teenagers, they rather be wrong and suffer the consequences than not have even symbolic power and control over their lives.

In the developmental process of adult versus child power and control, the relationship moves from the adult having virtually absolute power and control and the child having virtually no power and control to be eventually, the adult having virtually no power and control and the child having total power and control. In the transition from infancy to adulthood, there needs to be a gradual shift in the balance between who holds the power and control. Theoretically, at a certain point the parent should downshift to having 80% power and control while the child should up shift to having 20% power and control in the child's life (would that be around kindergarten age?). At a later point, the balance should be approximately 50-50 (hypothetically, sometime during elementary school?). Gradually, the balance would move toward the adult having perhaps only 10% power and control



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and the child having 90% power and control in the child's life (adolescence?). Eventually, the child -- no longer a child but an adult will have 100% power and control in his or her own life. However, if the relationship between the parent and the child has been a healthy and respectful one, even as the child has ever increasing power and control in his or her own life, the parent maintains significant **influence** on the child/adult child's life. Unfortunately, some parents find having influence to be insufficient for their own emotional and psychological needs. They have extreme difficulty letting go of power and control over their child's life, even well beyond when the child's maturity has justified passing more of it over to him or her. Such parents are often correctly typified by their children as control freaks. As such parents continue to try to assert power and control, they lose influence in their child's (and adult child's) life that they would have otherwise always had maintained.

SECURITY

As adolescents make the transition into adulthood, they are leaving the relatively secure world of childhood with its easy-going lack of accountability and moving into an adult world of responsibility. And, they do so often without the clear rites of passage and apprenticeships from prior generations, and sometimes, without solid guidance from their parents who themselves may be struggling to deal with current societal demands. This is an anxiety provoking process that threatens their sense of security.

Adolescents will tend to move toward any behavior or activity that supports their greater sense of security. However, as young people still, the security that is more tangible is in the short-term and not necessarily in the long-term. As a result, behaviors or activities that support immediate security needs tend to be favored over those that sacrifice the present for long-term needs or security. Unfortunately, many adults when frustrated by their lack of power and control and influence over their children's choices and behavior, will implicitly and explicitly threaten them with rejection and abandonment if they do not conform. And, sometimes functionally reject or abandon them emotionally and psychologically, if not also physically. The threat of rejection or abandonment is another manipulation that the teenager will sense and often defy to everyone's detriment. With this threat to their security, there becomes little, if any reason for the adolescent to try to remain connected with the adult. Besides, they have adolescent peers who will be accepting of them no matter what; the unconditional acceptance by the peers stands in stark contrast to the highly conditional acceptance/rejection by their parents. It is no wonder that many teenagers turn to their peers as they turn away from and as they are turned away from by their parents. However, if despite all the conflict and differences of opinion, the adolescent is secure that the nurturing caring adult will never abandon or reject him or her, then the conflict and differences of opinion can occur in a safe forum -- an honest and loving forum.

Of these four principles, power & control and respect are the most important. Of these two, power & control is the most important to the teen. Unfortunately, many youth are so used to being disrespected, that the threat or experience of disrespect from adults is not particularly new or impactful. Power & control is so important that keeping even just the **illusion** of power & control is enough to take being disrespected by adults. In actuality, RIPS is a model of positive communication with any person of any age in any situation. The young man in the vignette at the beginning of the article acknowledged my question, "It's tough, isn't it?" with a slight barely perceptible ½ inch nod, signifying "Yes, it is tough." He had been ripped! And connected with. I continued, "I bet your mom, doesn't even know what she does that feels disrespectful. Did you



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know that, Mom?” She shook her head, no. “You should tell her.” For the first time in a long time, he felt that she cared. He turned to her and said, “Well Mom, remember when...” The follow up discussion about what he had experienced allowed for the young man and his mother to actually communicate in a positive manner. There was more to this particular relationship and therapy and to this process, but this was the beginning where there had been no hope. This is not just a process to deal with adolescents; it is a basic healthy communication process for any interaction and in any relationship. It works with adults, it works with partners and spouses, it works with colleagues and neighbors, and it works with little children and babies as well. Rip them all!



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Chapter 16

SIMPLE QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT YOUR CHILD How They Guide You to Help Your Child

My kid... he kinda does this thing. He doesn't do it all the time, but it's something that I have noticed. I think it's something that he's done for a long time. I see other kids doing stuff like this too, but not as often... not quite the same. Is it something that he might... that he'll grow out of? I didn't think it was such a big deal, but his teacher mentioned it to me. I guess I'm asking now, because his preschool teacher mentioned it to me too a few years ago. And my mother-in-law said something about knowing another kid who was kinda the same. And then had some kind of problems later on. It really doesn't seem that bad. Do you think it is OK that he does this? Is this something I should be worried about? Is there something I should do... that I can do?

Many times when I work with parents or teachers, they present with a lot of anxiety about whether or not their child has a serious problem or not. Sometimes, it's clear that there is a problem. However, often the adults are not clear whether it is a problem that can be readily handled, will pass naturally, or is something substantial and potentially dangerous. There is a simple set of six questions that I often use to begin the assessment and diagnosis process. Many times, the answers to these questions bring great relief to the adults. Other times, the questions allow them to have a focus that will improve successful interventions to help the child. The questions are asked approximately in this form, "Is this a(n) _____ child?"

IS THIS AN ANGRY CHILD?

Some children and some adults are angry people. They carry in their bodies, their facial expressions, in their attitudes, values, beliefs, and in their behaviors consistent anger. Or, the anger lies shallowly beneath the surface. The anger can come from historical grievances, current hurts or stress, and often, from perceived attacks or slights. Small things that could be or would be perceived as inconsequential by others are held on to for days, weeks, months, and even years -- held on to forever. When I work with couples, one or the other may mention an issue, or there has been distress or hurt. Interestingly, a member or both members of the couple may claim that he or she has just accepted it and moved on. Sometimes, they have moved on because they have processed the issue, reconciled it, come to some resolution, and as such, have a greater intimacy and understanding between them. However, many times the issue has not been completely processed, not been reconciled, has not reached mutually satisfactory resolution, and there is now less intimacy and understanding between the couple. Yet, they may still claim that they have accepted it and moved on. In such cases, I sometimes use the metaphor that they have taken the issue and squeezed it and crushed it into a small hard nugget of bitterness that they dropped onto the pile -- the pile of resentment. This pile of resentment often becomes the Mount Bitterness that blocks the transmission of nurturing and intimacy. It is often a mountain that is actually volcanic and likely to explode at any given time. It is often clear to others, that the bitterness and the anger lie active beneath the surface.

Is your child, an angry child? The anger may manifest itself in temper tantrums, a hypersensitivity, and a hypervigilance. Or, it may express in a seething mood -- a sullen attitude toward everyone and everything. This is not the same as the common reality that your child can get and does get angry at times. Everyone gets angry at times. Everyone has experiences in



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situations where getting angry is the most natural thing for them to do. It is also important to remember that anger is a normal, healthy, and positive energy, if properly expressed. Anger empowers us to take the risks that we would otherwise be too fearful to consider. Anger gives us the energy to challenge the things that need to be challenged in order to have a healthy and secure life. Anger feeds the righteousness that enables one to take care of oneself. How often have you been shortchanged by some store or been dismissed by someone, and then use anger to energize yourself to confront your potential adversary? "You see this!? They overcharged me again! What's wrong with them? I'm tired of this mess! I'm going back to the store and get my money back!" Why would someone bother to go through all these emotional shenanigans in order just to get a few bucks back? What is so daunting about getting a simple error corrected? What is intimidating is that the other person or the institution may be insulting, dismissive, or even humiliating to you as you approach them. Confrontation has danger for many people. Sometimes, the danger has been very real in their life experiences whether in the family or in certain communities or historical experiences. Other times, there is not physical danger but an emotional or psychological danger. Anger often gives us the energy to confront this danger in order to have justice or security. This is also why you should never tell someone, "Don't be so angry! I don't see why you are so angry!" In saying that, you're disabling them from the energy that allows them to take care of themselves. What is more appropriate, is to acknowledge the anger coming from some righteous existential place, while also challenging, guiding, or shaping the actions and behavior the anger initiates. Is this an angry child? This question refers to the ongoing and enduring -- more times than not, with or without provocation angry mood which becomes an angry personality. If the answer is yes, then there is a greater level of concern.

It is important to remember that anger is normally not the primary emotion. Anger is normally the secondary emotion. Before there is anger, there is an underlying emotion -- and emotion that asks for an action of self-preservation, increased security, and nurturing. In other words, before the powerful active secondary emotion of anger, there is often a primary vulnerable emotion. Anger, however often ignites behavior that can be highly problematic and destructive for individuals and the community. Such behavior of striking out and of hurting self, others, and the community process and property is so sensational, that it automatically draws the attention and discipline of other people (including the authorities to adult transgressions, and of adults to children's misbehavior). People are usually aware that the behavior has a precedent in the anger of the transgressors. However, they often forget that the anger also has a precedent. Boys and men are particularly vulnerable to this misdiagnosis and to a cultural socialization process that disallows them and disconnects them from their vulnerable feelings. This is exemplified in the classic plot of every so-called "action flick" over the last several decades. In the first ten, fifteen, or at most twenty minutes of the action or guy movie, the hero's mother, father, brother, sister, wife, girlfriend, best friend, old friend from childhood, child, teacher, captain, childhood mentor, teammate... or all or some combination of the above are massacred by some criminal, henchmen of some corporate despot, or terrorist. As he holds his dying (fill in the blank), he despairs with tremendous anguish -- tears streaming down his face. His (fill in the blank) dies. The finality of the death hits him and his despair intensifies -- for about another 30 seconds! Then he turns his head up and although the tears are still fresh on his face, his jaw sets and his eyes turn hard. And the rest of the movie is cold anger and KILL KILL KILL!! Such a movie plot is an expression both of anger being normally a secondary emotion, and of cultural male training that any of the sensitive and vulnerable feelings are not to be expressed (love can be -- sometimes!) and when they do arise, they are to be expressed through anger, or anger is expressed in their place.



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If the answer is "Yes, I have an angry child," then you must do two things: first, find the emotion or issue underneath the anger, and second, teach the child how to express that anger in appropriate and healthy manners.

IS THIS A SAD CHILD?

Some people, including children carry a heaviness in their heart as they move through the day... as they move through their lives. Normally, when we think about someone being sad or depressed, we consider two very different manifestations of that. The first is the normal sadness or disappointment that occurs in life when one is disappointed, disempowered, dismissed, disrespected, devalued, insulted or impugned, or frustrated by others' actions or by one's own behavior. This sadness or depression is transitory. It is an immediate consequence of circumstances in the immediate experience: a friend who away on a trip, losing a promotion, finding oneself in debt... stepping on the bathroom scale! However, in the larger schemes of life and of living and relationships, there are multiple other messages and interactions that are fulfilling. This sadness or depression passes as the rest of life that is relatively fulfilling, rewarding, and meaningful, reasserts itself -- or as a one reasserts him/herself in life. This is not what this question asks. The other major perspective that people come to when they think of depression is of Major Depression, which is a clinical diagnosis. When someone has Major Depression, he or she is virtually nonfunctional in life. The depression is so pervasive that such a person is often unable to make even the simplest decisions in life, to maintain basic self-care habits, to work, to interact with other people, and sometimes, to even just get out of bed. Profound feelings of low self-esteem, self-hatred, helplessness and hopelessness and often a deep sense of humiliation for having such negative feelings can move such afflicted individual towards suicidal thinking and suicide.

Normally, the question "Is this a sad child?" does not refer to either normal sadness or clinical Major Depression. One hopes that the severity of symptoms of Major Depression would be readily recognized and action to intervene activated. There is, however, another level of sadness or depression that can be likened to being the "walking dead." Or, moving through life with a 50 pound weight on your back that fluctuates ounce by ounce on a day-to-day basis. It becomes a weight that bears down on your life -- sometimes, gradually intensifying and exhausting you. The clinical term for this type of depression is Dysthymic Disorder. An individual with this issue is largely functional in life -- he or she gets up, takes care of personal hygiene, gets him/herself to school or work, and has relationships. And, "progresses" through school, career, and life. However, the progress or accomplishments ring hollow, as there is no sense of growth or achievement. Such a person may or may not act out or show behavior that makes other people notice or even think that they are depressed. Adults often function for decades in this mode. There is usually some significant and enduring dysfunction in the family or experience of trauma that is the source of the ongoing dread or sadness: a mentally ill parent, an alcoholic family member, physically present but emotionally disconnected parents, ongoing or historical emotional if not physical or sexual abuse, victimization, excessive stress, profound emotional loss, unfulfilling relationships, secret pain, and so forth. In adults, the low level of depression may not be noticeable because of the person otherwise functioning in life (although, with subdued mood or hidden sadness). In children, it is often much more difficult to recognize this kind of depression. Children will sometimes express depression in the same classic ways as adults do: lethargy, appetite changes, hopelessness, negative thinking, isolation, and so forth.



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However, children will also express depression in all sorts of additional manners. They may act out, lose toilet training, change eating habits, become obsessive, become unmotivated in school and other activities, hyperfocus on school and other activities... in other words, just about any change in behavior can be an indication of depression. Some children have such enduring (but low level -- without severe acting out) negative experiences from so early in their lives that they do not know anything else. Many of these kids are time bombs of depression that explode when they reach adolescence. Others pass through adolescence and continue their low level of depression decades into their adult life. It is important to remember that just because a child or person does not present an obvious crisis to others, that does not necessarily mean that everything is OK. People in children are not normally just sad; there are usually reasons why they are sad. While there are people who do benefit quite a bit from antidepressant medication, with any examination of their life history and experiences, one will find reasons for them to be and to have become depressed. If the answer is "Yes, this is a sad child," then his or her adults need find out why this child is sad. And then, to work toward addressing those issues.

IS THIS AN ANXIOUS OR FEARFUL CHILD?

An anxious child or person may or may not be a fearful person as well. When someone has a fear, however, it is a specific thing, situation or experience, or person that is feared. In some ways, it is relatively simple to deal with. If your child is afraid of snakes, then there are two relatively simple approaches to dealing with the fear. One is to avoid snakes! No snakes -- no fear! No fear -- no problem! Two, is to facilitate a systematic desensitization to snakes. Simply put, this means to gradually expose oneself more and more to snakes in a matter where one maintains control of exactly how much exposure he or she chooses to experience. In doing this, the person can gradually experience his or her fear and gradually experience his or her ability to handle the fear successfully. Over time, he or she will gradually challenge the fear with greater and greater exposure until the fear has been eliminated... or has reached a manageable level.

The natural tendency for most people -- much less children, is to avoid their fear. However, in avoiding your fear, often the fear becomes more and more intense and more and more overwhelming and intimidating. Such a fear can dominate and overwhelm life. If you have a fearful child, you need to determine if the fear is imagined or a product of inexperience, or if it has a basis in reality. If the fear is imagined or a product of inexperience, then the process of systematic desensitization would be advised. However, if the fear it has a basis in reality because, for example, there is a bully on the playground, or a tyrannical adult, or a punitive and humiliating social dynamic (including racism, sexism, classism, etc), then the child needs the adult to help him or her address the threat. Often, the reason or source the fear is not something the child can handle him or herself. The help that the child needs is often more than just advice. Often, the child needs the action of the adult. On my web site (www.RonaldMah.com) in the section on articles is a series on self-esteem, which includes several articles addressing the victim and bully dynamic.

An anxious child or person is different from a fearful child or person. While a fearful child or person has something specific that is the source or object of their fear, an anxious child or person does not have a specific source or object for their anxiety. Anxiety is amorphous and undifferentiated. It is fear without direction and as a consequence, fear that has no remedy. Everyone has experiences of anxiety that causes one distress. However, the anxiety tends to be more momentary or confined to a time period as one ponders and tries to anticipate possible and



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probable, foreseeable and unforeseeable challenges or difficulties as a task or an experience is to encountered. Anxiety about a first date. "Do I look OK? Should I wear that other top? Will I know what to say? What if we don't have any common interests?" Anxiety that one might forget a part of his or her speech -- which part one doesn't know! Or, someone might be bored! Anxiety that you might get brain freeze during a final exam -- when? And which part of the test? You don't know! Anxiety that you won't like kindergarten -- which aspect of kindergarten? Don't know! Just might. Anxiety is connected to the survival instinct. To be aware -- to be sensitive and to be vigilant just in case there may be some danger ahead. The flight or fight response to danger has a multitude of physiological consequences: various hormones that give greater energy, numb the body to sensation, increase blood pressure, and redirect blood flow to the larger muscles for battle or for running. These physiological changes serve the immediate task at hand -- to survive. The question of "Is this an anxious child?" does not refer to this normal and occasional anxiety. Children want to survive -- want to have fun, want to get to do things and have things, and as such, may have some anxiety. However, some children and adults stay in a constant state of anxiety. This is dangerous because when the body stays in a constant state of anxiety or stress -- stays in the flight or fight mode, these physiological changes can wear the body down. In adults, it has been referred to as the Type A personality. Type A personalities have a multitude of physical problems as well as a propensity for emotional and psychological problems.

Some children and adults are naturally more sensitive than others. As babies, they may have been more sensitive to light, noise and activity. Such individuals are more vulnerable to becoming anxious people. However, the anxious child or person is not just sensitive and vigilant, he or she is hypersensitive and hypervigilant. The hypersensitivity and hypervigilance comes from a greater sense of vulnerability to a chaotic and unpredictable life. Someone who is strong, powerful, able to handle the challenges of life, and with ample support and protection from their caregivers will tend not to need to be as sensitive and as vigilant as someone who is weaker and less adequately supported and protected. It is important to note that caregivers can be over vigilant and overprotect as well, which can create a hypersensitivity and hypervigilance in the child. This is also addressed in my articles about the victim-bully dynamic in the series on self-esteem. An anxious child needs to be supported and protected, but also to be promoted to find his or her strength, capacities, skills, and resources to handle various challenges. Parents of anxious children also need to take a careful look at themselves and the family to see whether or not there are dynamics and behaviors that create the need for the child to be hypersensitive and hypervigilant. In other words, is there instability, distress, unpredictable and arbitrary discipline, or other threatening and intimidating dynamics in the family that would cause the child to feel vulnerable and to become anxious. If there is, there is not only a need to help and support the child, but also a need to address the fundamental health of the family dynamic.

IS THIS A CHILD WHO IS HOLDING PAIN OR LOSS?

People can experience devastating losses and great pain in the passage of ordinary life experiences. Sometimes the losses are expected -- the passing away of the beloved grandmother or grandfather; moving from a house, neighborhood, school, and community; a friend who moves away. Sometimes the losses are unexpected -- a young life loss in a car accident, a financial crisis, a discovery of a medical disability. Losses can be physical, such as a person; or it can be symbolic, such as a loss of a dream. People suffer pain when they have losses, but some people suffer in silence and alone. The grief/loss process is described using the



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pneumonic, DABDA. The first D stands for Denial. People often deny the intensity or even the existence of pain because it is intolerable. After an initial period of denial, people often move into the next stage represented by the letter A, of Anger -- anger that the loss has been suffered, anger for being abandoned or anger at the world for allowing this to happen. Following anger next comes B, which stands for Bargaining, which occurs when people try to negotiate the severity of the loss and pain. In an attempt to relieve the intensity, people try to look on the "bright side" -- Grandpa had a long life, we're still healthy, there still is a chance for gain, etc. Unfortunate, bargaining usually doesn't work for long as people come to the reality that the loss is not only real, but also final. Then they move into the second D of DABDA, Depression. The depression can be very difficult to endure but it is necessary to be experienced and processed in order to get to the final stage of the grief/loss process -- the second A, which stands for Acceptance. When people reach the stage of acceptance, the loss and the pain has not gone away, however the loss and the pain has been processed to the point where it has a place -- a stable healthy place in the people's life, heart, and spirit. As such people reflect upon their losses, there is a sadness but not a biting debilitating grief. With healing, there is a reflective warmth and appreciation of the place the person, experience, or dream had in their lives.

Individuals who do not, have not, or do not allow themselves -- or have not been allowed to go through the process of grief/loss, will often find themselves stuck in their pain. Some adults have held unprocessed loss for decades that caused them to live their lives in emotional and psychological pain. Children sometimes do not know how to process their losses and pain. They need to be supported to express their losses and pain. Sometimes, children will refrain from dealing with their pain -- even hiding it, because they feel it is not allowed to happen. This can be an overt command from adults to "suck it up," "be tough," or "don't be a baby about it," or, it could be from following the model of adults who deny their own pain and losses. There are many cultural variations on how losses are processed. Some allow for more overt grieving, while others have more symbolic or ritualistic expressions of grieving. Sometimes children follow the cultural model presented by their parents without understanding the deeper meanings and also, alternative expressions of grieving. Children need to be given permission to acknowledge that they have losses and pain before they can begin to grieve their losses and process their pain. Often, parents of children need to get themselves that same permission so that their children can have the permission as well.

IS THIS AN "OFF" CHILD?

This is the most sensitive and the most threatening version of the questions. Every person, especially every adult has had experiences and interactions with many many other people. They have had experiences and interactions in a huge multitude of circumstances and situations with those thousands of other people. Although, most people are not educated, trained, or experienced enough to diagnose certain cognitive, physical, neurological, educational, emotional, vocational, and other specialized challenges, just about everyone has more than ample experience with the range of "normal" behavior. From this instinct about the range of normal behavior, comes an instinct and recognition when behavior is outside of the experienced range. Usually, people will not be able to name what the issue might be or even be able to identify specifically what is unusual or different, but they can note that something is "off" about someone's behavior. It might be how someone holds their body, their gait when they walk, a look on their face or in their eyes, an unusual association of words or thoughts, a consistent inconsistency, difficulty doing something that shouldn't be difficult, an inability to retain or learn



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something, a developmental inconsistency, unexpected strength countered by unexpected weakness in some area, odd reactions, and so forth.

When something "off" is noticed and is repeated or replicated over time, it does not mean that something is wrong with your child. What it means is that something is "off" that needs to be assessed by someone with greater experience and expertise than you or the other adults (including professionals your child may be in normal contact with) possess. In my professional experience, there have been numerous times when a client, a teacher, or I myself have noticed that something is "off" with the child, referred the child to be assessed by someone with greater expertise and training, and have the expert almost immediately recognize and nail down with the specific issue is for that child. And, the child who had been suffering unsuccessfully while dealing with his or her unrecognized and undiagnosed issue, had been able to be immediately given the specific training and support that he or she needed to be more functional and successful. Undiagnosed learning disabilities, undiagnosed neurological issues, undiagnosed auditory or visual deficits, undiagnosed vocational challenges, undiagnosed developmental delays, undiagnosed physical challenges, undiagnosed cognitive processes, and any other undiagnosed issue can doom a child to a lifetime of unnecessary suffering. This is daunting and even terrifying for parents to consider that their child might be "off." Every parent wants their child to be at least normal, if not exceptional. For parents to accept the possibility that their child may have some special challenge causes them to experience a profound grief/loss process. This may cause them to get stuck in the first D, the Denial of the DABDA process -- denial that anything could be possibly wrong with their child... denial that their child will have to work hard and suffer through his or her challenges. Unfortunately, the failure to accept and go through this process, will cause their child to suffer needlessly and not get the help that maybe readily available -- and highly effective.

IS THIS A HAPPY CHILD?

A happy child can be a goofy child! A happy child can be an active child. A happy child may lose control, have a temper tantrum, get into fights, become sad, anxious, fearful, and angry at times. A happy child may have occasional odd behavior or even, periods of odd behavior. However, a happy child usually is able to receive and integrate discipline and support so that he or she can be successful. If there is behavior that is of concern to parents or teachers, there should be greater concern if there are any answers of "Yes" to any of the first five questions: "Is this an angry child? Is this a sad child? Is this an anxious or fearful child? Is this a child that is holding loss or pain? Is this an 'off' child?" However, if the answers are "No" to all of the first five questions and "Yes" to the last question whether he or she is a happy child, then in all likelihood, as long as the adults involved are reasonably healthy, informed, and involved, that normal discipline, classroom management, and adult support and guidance will be sufficient to handle the behavioral, educational, emotional, and social challenges. Adults should turn their energies toward addressing developmental issues, specific situations, the child's physical condition, disruptions in the routines of the family or school, personality or temperamental challenges, and the dynamics of the child's social situations. I will discuss a hierarchy or process to approach problematic or challenging behavior of children in the next article.

If you have answered any of the first five questions with a "Yes" then it is critical to address the underlying causes that exist or have manifested in your child. If, on the other hand, you have a happy child, there is still a lot of work to do. However, your high anxiety (amorphous and



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undifferentiated anxiety without a specific object or focus) and urge to be hypersensitive and hypervigilant will not be so necessary. You can be "just" sensitive and vigilant about your child!



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Chapter 17

HIERARCHIES OF DISCIPLINE

Where do you start? Where do you end up?

Oh my gosh! I can't believe she could do that! You wouldn't think something that big could fit into something that small! Okay... it's parent time. Time to do the old discipline thing... or is it, the new discipline thing?

Where do I start? How do I start? Reason with her? Distract? Do expectations? Trick? Motivate? Coerce? Punish? Threaten?

Wait... what's it all about anyway? A maturity thing? Circumstances? Fatigue? Hunger? Getting sick? A disruption? Personality? Are we all nuts? Is there something wrong or off? Did the devil make her do it?

Shoot, it's not parent time! It's the daily discipline detective time!

IN LOVE WITH YOUR HAMMER

Many people discipline from one perspective only. The perspective may differ from parent to parent, but what all of these parents have been common is that they assume that there is only one reason for the behavior (or misbehavior) and therefore only one approach or even one discipline in response. What happens when you fall in love with a hammer? Everything starts looking like a nail! Bam! Bam! **Bam!** Some people fall in love with or get stuck with only one way to understand behavior and only one approach to respond to it. Years ago, I remember reading a study where it was found that a significant percentage of parents of preschoolers use corporal punishment to discipline their children, despite the spankings not working to eliminate the behavior! Such parents may not have fallen in love with this simplistic approach to discipline (that behavior that is punished will be eliminated), but have been stuck with it because this was their original model from their childhood and there had been no re-examination or introduction to appropriate discipline.

Quite often, when I conduct a training for parents or teachers, someone will come up to me and asked, "Is it OK if I _____ my child?" My normal response is, "Does it work?" A common response to me is, "Well... not really." Then my response is, "Then why are you asking me if it's OK!?" Not only are people stuck in doing discipline that does not work, they seek permission to continue doing the discipline that does not work! "Is it OK if I keep on use this hammer to bang on this screw, even though it isn't going in straight and is getting all bent up?" Discipline techniques are tools to help deal with behavior and discipline issues. However, as with all tools, they can be properly used or improperly applied to the wrong task. A hammer is great for driving in a nail, but a poor choice to chop wood with. As with all tools, they can be very useful, as well as quite dangerous. In addition, an appropriate tool can be chosen to complete a desired task, but the task may not actually serve the overall goal. A Phillips head screwdriver is the correct tool to use to screw in a Phillips head screw. But using a Phillips head screw is not the best way to attach a button to a shirt! The following hierarchy of discipline discusses overall principles in approaching affecting the behavior of children. It seeks to be logical, to be careful of what the adult teaches when he/she disciplines, to be responsive to the child, and tries to give children responsibility but



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also attempts to keep the adult's responsibility to be the adult. The diagnostic hierarchy that follows later in the article, discusses the various underlying principles or reasons for behavioral challenges, and suggests appropriate approaches to match the underlying principles or reasons.

It is very important to note that before any attempt at discipline, there needs to be CONNECTION. Being in tune to the feelings of the child, and then validating him or her **no matter the effects of his or her actions**. The feelings of upsetness, of being wronged, of being angry are **always real and valid to the CHILD**, whether the circumstances and situation justify the actions and results or not. If you skip this connecting/validating process, **none of the discipline steps will be really absorbed by the child!**

Level 1: THE CIVILIZED APPROACH

These principles need to be kept in mind at the second and third levels as well. (This is what most of us promise to do until we have real children to discipline!). It is important to be reasonable with children. Present reason and logic to the child. Be clear about what is acceptable and unacceptable. Sometimes adults forget to tell children, "That is not OK." Children are often testing boundaries and simply need to be told that the boundary exists right here. Sometimes, they are not even testing boundaries (which implies that they want to extend the boundaries), but are actually just looking for the boundaries. As soon as they are told, that these are the boundaries, then they relax and become secure in their behavior. Explain to them what the logical consequences (negatives and benefits) of their behavior will be on others. Explain what the expectations are for their behavior. This trusts and values the children's ability to be reasonable. Positive expectations are often met with positive behavior. However, remember that some people are unable to be reasonable for various reasons. Reason works with reasonable people. In addition, let the children know how their behavior can both please and displease parents and other adults. This works with the children's natural instinct to please those important to them. Discipline from this perspective, is a process of socialization to be a member of the community -- a civilized community.

Level 2: CREATIVE/LOGICAL SERVING MOTIVATIONS

This approach is dependent on finding the individual keys to situations and personalities. The adult needs to be discerning and evaluative as to what the child desires in the situation. Children need to feel the logic of the motivation as to how it serves them. Such logic is internal and self-serving for children. Caring for others feelings and needs as a motivation for change may not work with younger children. That may be developmentally challenging for the very young (unfortunately, sometimes also quite challenging for the quite old!). However, logic for children is normally very short-term. Long-term consequences are not real to them. Putting things in terms of short-term consequences is important. Frame the choices of behavior from the benefit or loss that children will receive. The adult needs to include in the choices, the limitations that the adult will enforce. In other words, that the adult will not allow a positive benefit when a negative choice has been made, and that the adult will **ensure** a negative consequence when a negative choice has been made! "If you choose this, then this is what will happen (positive). If you choose that, then this is what will happen (negative). Or, since you chose this, then..." Be clear that the consequences are a result of the behavior and choices. Children will often do things impulsively without any consciousness of the ramifications of their behavior. Helping them see how this affects their life, their opportunities, and their happiness is critical to their development.



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Level 3: PUNITIVE AND COERCIVE MOTIVATIONS

This is, unfortunately where many of us often do our disciplining, sometimes harmfully. We skip the second level after attempting to reason with children, become frustrated or cannot figure it out, and move toward punitive and coercive motivations. A common coercive discipline is to use distraction. Sometimes it is appropriate to distract children from something that they are obsessing over and that causes them to behave negatively. It may be useful to teach children how to distract themselves from frustrating experiences that would otherwise cause them to misbehave. On the other hand, overused and misused distraction can present a negative message to children. When children are upset about something, the things that they are upset about are the focus of their disturbance, distress, anxiety, or sadness. Distracting them from such things may give them the message that their urgencies are unimportant -- that their feelings of disturbance, distress, anxiety, are sadness are irrelevant and to be dismissed. This is a highly dangerous and negative existential message, "Your feelings don't matter!" Distraction can be okay if it includes the message, "I know you feel really bad. Let's see if doing this will help you make yourself feel better." This both acknowledges the feelings and frames the distraction as a way to soothe the feelings rather than ignore them.

External motivations can be sometimes effective in disciplining children. This could be rewards... or bribes! It can be scoldings or punishments such as timeout or spanking. Such motivation, both positive and negative should be kept as relevant and logical to the situations as possible. Positive motivations such as rewards tend to be easier to manage. The rewards are expressions of approval for positive behavior. It is easy to be pleased with your child's behavior. The rewards are often secondary to the goodwill and positive energy the child receives. On the other hand, be very careful when offering reward for the lack of negative behavior. This discipline double negative does not focus children on positive behavior, but focuses them only on the avoidance of negative behavior. Positive behavior gets overlooked and only when the child messes up, will there be attention and punishment. Negative consequences should fit the negative behavior. If the child is riding his or her bicycle dangerously in the street, then an appropriately motivating consequence or punishment is to be denied the right to ride his or her bicycle for the next week. On the other hand, losing television rights for the next week is not as relevant or logical to the situation.

An appropriate way to frame punitive discipline may be to look at the time expended as a consequence of the behavior. When a child misbehaves, he or she creates a need to manage the disruption that takes time away from other issues. When a child throws a tantrum; it takes time to settle him or her down; to clean up the mess; or to stabilize the other people in the community. All this takes time away from the adult and others. An appropriate way to approach giving the child a consequence is to format the consequence in such a way that the adult and others regain lost time, and the child who threw the tantrum expends his or her time restoring others lost time. An eight-year-old who threw a temper tantrum selected as his consequence, that he fold the laundry that his mother otherwise would have done. This gave the mother about 10 or 15 minutes of time to sit and read a magazine. She felt it was a good deal for her!

Level 4: COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO CHILDREN

Or when nothing simple seems to be working! Sometimes, children's behavior is not merely about discipline, but also about the community that they exist in. Then it is important to look at the overall and overlapping communities of the child. Is there consistency between all involved (between parents, between parents and other important adults including teachers) so as not to



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confuse them? Is there effective information exchange between all parties to clarify behavior and responses, and share expertise (parent to teacher & teacher to parent)? Is there an exchange of insight between everyone to disclose and evaluate possible underlying reasons for behavior?

Level 5: TAKING A HARD LOOK AT THE INDIVIDUAL

It is important to distinguish common developmental and discipline issues with more severe and less common challenges that interfere with the integration and processing of internal processes and inter-personal communication. If problems persist, professional consultation would be highly recommended, as opposed to hoping that children will "grow out of it." Be sure to find the right professional. While many parents turn to their children's pediatricians, pediatricians' expertise is primarily in physical medical health and development. Early childhood educators, developmental specialists, neurologists, speech and language professionals, mental health professionals, vocational therapists, and other specialists are often more appropriate to consult depending on your child's issues.

A DIAGNOSTIC ORDER FOR UNDERSTANDING & APPROACHING BEHAVIOR

This material was developed in response to parents, teachers, and social services professionals who needed a systematic process to understand the motivations behind children's behavior (and adult behavior as well!). Often adults make assumptions about what may be the reasons behind children's behavior. Children may exhibit the same behavior for a multitude of reasons. A child who hits may be hitting for any of a variety of reasons. While punishment may stop the child's immediate behavior, it does not address any underlying issue, which may cause the behavior to repeat itself in the future. Although, it is usually important to set boundaries regarding the behavior, adults also need to understand what causes the behavior in the first place. As long as underlying issues continue to exist, the behavior often reasserts itself or is not responsive to boundaries.

This suggests an orderly diagnostic process, starting with looking at things from a developmental perspective to higher levels of concern. In many situations, several of the issues may apply to the child. Some people have a favorite theory to explain why children behave a certain way and as a result, always look to that theory for guidance. Unfortunately, in the more complex situations, behavior is activated by a combination of issues. For example, a high-energy distractible 6 year old boy who is tired, has watched a lot of violent television and plays a lot of violent videogames, has emotionally neglectful and physically abusive parents, in a poorly managed and crowded classroom, frustrated with academics because of a learning disability during the Christmas session may... in fact, probably will act out. It may be more convenient to narrow down the underlying issue to one theory, but it is neither appropriate nor effective. It is important to address all the relevant issues and not just the ones that the adult is the most familiar with or comfortable with. Put away your hammer and pull out the entire tool chest!

1) DEVELOPMENTAL FACTORS

Fidgety, putting things in the mouth, touches everything, can't stop making noise, and is... six months old! Hmmm, that's OK. And is one year old. Hmmm, that's still OK. And is four years old. Well, I'm a bit concerned. And is 10 years old. Now, I'm worried! And is 35 years old! Oh oh! The greater concern as the individual is getting older comes from an expected gradual internalization of social expectations about what is appropriate behavior as far as sitting still, touching things, and being quiet -- polite and respectful. The older the person is, the more one



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expects him or her to self regulate his or her behavior. Often times, the behavior of the child is actually appropriate according to his or her developmental stage. Although the behavior may be challenging (or messy! Or very loud!), it also may be normal behavior for a child at that age. When developmental behaviors are frustrated, there are often even greater problems because of developmental needs will continue to assert themselves. The basic approach is to find a way for such developmental needs to be satisfied in a safe and appropriate manner. For example, running outside to take care of physical energy rather than getting into trouble being active inside. The basic question is, "Is what my child doing OK for children of his or her age?"

2) SITUATIONAL FACTORS

Two kids and one new toy truck! Five people in the family and one bathroom! 10,000 applicants for 3,000 college spots! Sounds like trouble! Sometimes, the situation, usually a shortage of resources (toys, for example) is the main cause for a problem. Changing the availability of resources (making another toy available, for example) may be an effective approach. On the other hand, sometimes socializing children to share the resources can be effective (how to take turns, for example). Conflict and the accompanying negative behavior may arise as individuals anticipate a situation where there may be a shortage of resources. For example, in the line of shoppers outside the shopping mall for the early bird after-Christmas sale!

3) PHYSICAL FACTORS

"Are you feeling OK? You've been a bit cranky today." The physical condition of the child often affects his or her behavior. Basically, this is being sick, tired, or hungry. Often children misbehave because they are sick, or sometimes, because they are getting sick. If they are not yet showing that they are sick, this can be very deceptive. Many teachers and parents in retrospect will realize that a child who is reporting in sick today, was acting up yesterday! They felt lousy yesterday and acted out without being aware that they were getting sick. Getting children healthy is the logical approach. Children who are tired often act out quite a bit. The obvious approach is to help them get enough rest. Unfortunately, it is easy to forget that tired children behave poorly. I had a little girl in my preschool program who sometimes would come to school after having stayed up late. On those days, instead of being the little sweetheart, she was the nastiest grumpiest little girl you ever met! Fortunately, her mother learned to warn us and as soon as she started to fall apart, we would put her to nap. We didn't care if it was 7:30 a.m.; we put her to nap for everybody's well being! And hungry children? Feed them! A second grader was not doing well in her core topics. Most of these core topics were taught in the morning. This kid would not eat breakfast and would be operating on low blood sugar the entire morning (at lunchtime when he would finally eat, it would be as much as 18 hours after he had last eaten at 6 p.m. the night before). Getting him to eat breakfast made him a better student. Of course, don't adults who diet can get awfully grumpy as well as!?

4) EMOTIONAL CONDITION/DISRUPTION

Everyone tends to live his or her lives in a rhythm. When that rhythm is disrupted, some people react with disrupted behavior -- misbehavior. Adults sometimes do not recognize that there are things that disrupt children that they would not otherwise notice: a holiday, a visit from Grandma, a change in the schedule, someone new in the family or the class, and anything else that is different or not part of the normal routine. My wife, a kindergarten teacher at the time told me about a little boy who just couldn't seem to do anything correctly for the week. After a few days, she asked him what was going on with him because he was so behaving so differently



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than usual. Virtually vibrating with excitement, he said, "I'm going to Disneyland on Saturday!" Adults should try to anticipate when there are changes that may be disruptive to the child. Letting the child know ahead of time and giving him or her time to acclimate to the change helps a great deal. Reassurance that the disruption will not be enduring also often helps. In addition, sometimes disruptions in the adults' life resonate through the family and cause children to be disrupted as well. Children may react negatively to a parent's work schedule that has changed, which in turn has caused the family schedule and routine to change.

These first four sets of factors or issues are very commonsensical, but are sometimes forgotten when adults are under stress. It is useful to think of them and to use them in order. They are based on the **KISS** principle -- **Keep It Simple, don't be Stupid!** Sometimes parents become hypervigilant and over worried, and basically scare themselves with more complex and convoluted negative theories about behavior. **Keep It Simple, don't Scare yourself!** Look for the basic issues first. In addition, the next two sets of factors are very important because when they are forgotten, people move too quickly and dangerously into the last two sets of factors. The last two factors, while potentially very important, can if applied too quickly cause problems for everyone.

5) TEMPERAMENTAL ISSUES

Anyone who has two children or more should know this instinctively – kids are born different. Women often say that they could tell the difference during pregnancy, as the activity level of the children was different well before birth. Each person is born with a distinct set of temperamental traits -- a unique personality. The mix of temperamental traits creates both positive and challenging personalities for people. Sometimes the challenge is for the individual. Sometimes the individual's temperament is the challenge for other people. Also, sometimes the temperament of one person may match up very poorly with one person, while matching up very well with another person (you know... how you can't stand some people, while your partner just adores them!). It is important for an adult to understand his or her own temperament and how it matches up well or poorly with the child's (or colleague's, or spouse's). It is the initial responsibility of the adult to be self-aware of his or her own temperament, and to regulate his or her and his or her child's behavior according to the match or mismatch to make the relationship more successful. I will expand upon temperamental theory and its effect on behavior and relationships in the next article of this series.

6) ENVIRONMENTAL/ECOLOGICAL FACTORS

Every child and person operates within a system (often, multiple systems) of people such as a family or a class or a workplace. Earlier in this article, I mentioned collaboration between the different communities or systems of the child. Here, I am emphasizing the actual health of each of those systems. In other words, sometimes an "out of control" child behaves in such a manner because he or she is in an "out of control" family or classroom. Dysfunctional systems create extraordinary demands that may be beyond the capacity of children to handle without problematic behavior. The behaviors, the communication style, and the health and stability (or lack thereof) of the system can cause significant emotional, psychological, and behavioral responses from the child or person in the system. When the system (family, class, or workplace) is too unstable or unhealthy, directing all of attention energy toward the child and his or her behavior may be inappropriate and unsuccessful. Often, it is important to direct energy towards



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making the system more stable and healthy. Without the system becoming more stable and healthy, the child cannot get better.

7) PATHOLOGY FACTORS

In some situations, there may be something "wrong" or "off" about a child. Many, if not all parents fear that there may be something "wrong" about their children. Some parents become hypervigilant and even paranoid that something is wrong about their children, and they see issues where there are none. Other parents are so disturbed and overwhelmed by the possibility, that they deny or ignore clear signals that the child needs special attention and help. There can be significant issues that are biochemically based or from some other fundamental issue in a person's makeup that is especially challenging. ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperkinetic Disorder) or ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), autism, and learning disabilities may be issues that some children have (or adults have). Such issues, if applicable (great care must be made before making such diagnoses because of the stigma attached to them) need to be addressed with guidance from professionals. And, often treatment needs guidance from professionals as well. Unfortunately, many people (including professionals) often jump to this level of diagnosis inappropriately. This can often lead to people (such as teachers) becoming dismissive of the child, claiming that the child is beyond their scope of practice and experience.

8) MORAL FACTORS

"Bad Boy!" "Bad Girl!" All of the other factors need to be examined first, primarily to avoid parents and other adults making a negative moral judgment against the child. Even the most seemingly amoral children (or adults) normally had major problems in the earlier (lower levels) of issues that were poorly handled. This is the ultimate negative diagnosis and lead directly to dismissing the child as being beyond salvation.

There are other ways to look at the underlying causes of behaviors. This diagnostic hierarchy is an approach that I have used that has often has often proved to be useful. A single page chart version with short additional explanations is posted on my web site, www.RonaldMah.com in the Handouts section as "Diagnostic Order for Understanding and Approaching Behavior." In the next chapter, I will expand on temperamental theory as it applies to children's behavior and relationships. It is very useful in looking at not only children's behavior, but also couples relationships, families, and workplace dynamics.



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Chapter 18

TEMPERAMENT MATCH AND MISMATCH

They were born that way!

QUIET QUINCY – parent

Can you be a little quieter?

Slow down!

What!?

Watch out!

Oh my gosh!

I'm getting a headache!

ACTIVE ANDY -- child

Look at my plane! Look it!

(Running across the room)

Look at what I can do!

(Spinning around)

Oops! (Bumping the chair)

Yahoo! That was great!

ACTION ANDREW -- parent

What a cool plane!

Vroom! Vroom!

Wow, that's neat.

Watch out!

Boom! Bam! Yes!

Can I have a turn?

QUIET QUINCY – parent

What are you drawing?

That's a cute dog

Maybe later.

(Reading a magazine)

No, I'm enjoying reading.

(Continuing to read)

EASY ELLEN -- child

Look at the dog in my picture.

(Adding a collar on to the dog)

Look at my pretty doghouse.

(Continuing to color)

No thanks. (Drawing trees)

(Adding flowers by the dog)

ACTION ANDREW -- parent

Nice job.

You want to go walk the dog?

We could paint the dog's house.

Anyone want to go to the park?

Hmmm. Uh...

Uh... I'm going to wash the car.

The parents, Quincy and Andrew have two children: Andy and Ellen. They both love their children dearly, but Quincy and Ellen get along very easily together. Both Quincy and Ellen like more sedate activities and would be perfectly content to spend the day doing quiet activities at home: reading, doing arts and crafts projects, cooking, etc. Andrew and Andy also get along very well together for the most part. They are like two peas in a pod -- or perhaps, like two jumping beans in a jar! Half the time, Quincy thinks that Andrew despite being the dad seems to instigate the wild play that get Andy charging around the house. Andy and Andrew were both full energy most of the time. Quincy is a great mom to Andy but to be honest, Andy just wears her out sometimes. Quiet time for Andy is boisterous, active, and not particularly quiet for Quincy's comfort and expectations. As much as she hates to admit it, sometimes she just needs a break from Andy's energy. Sometimes, she needs a break from Andrew's energy, too! He can be just as bad. On the other hand, Andrew doesn't have any problem with his daughter Ellen. Ellen is Andrew's



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little sweetheart. Andrew figured out pretty early that Ellen didn't like the rambunctious play as much as he did or that Andy loved so much. Ellen did play with Andrew and could get active at times, but it just wasn't her preference. Ellen also played great with Andy and could keep up with his rambunctious play, but she could take that kind of play or not. Actually, Ellen got along pretty easily with everybody. This match and mismatch of family members is not unusual in many families. One member of the family may be often highly attractive to and compatible with a second family member, while having a hard time getting along with a third family member. On the other hand, a fourth family member may get along great with that third family member -- and perhaps, not get along particularly well with either of the first two family members. While this can be due to dysfunctional dynamics in the family and/or poor parenting, oftentimes the dynamics can be due to simple temperamental differences that each member of the family is basically born with.

DIDN'T HAVE THE CHANCE TO RUIN HER

I have two wonderful daughters who, from birth, showed different personalities and temperaments. One daughter was born with a fairly mellow temperament. On the very first day, as the nurse was changing her diaper, the nurse said to her, "How are you doing, little baby?" My daughter gazed at her with open calm eyes. The nurse exclaimed to us, "What a little sweetheart you have!" I responded, puffing out my chest, "Of course, it's genetic!" Throughout her childhood and now as a young adult, she continues to have this fairly mellow temperament. If she were told "no," she would be disappointed but take it with good grace (sometimes, offering a reasonable alternative in an effort to negotiate her point). My other daughter (and don't get me wrong, she's a wonderful person!) was born with a somewhat more intense temperament. On her very first day, as the nurse was changing her diaper, the nurse also said to her, "Hi little baby... how are you?" This daughter looked her in the eyes and screamed at the top of her lungs, "Ahhhhh!" I quickly pointed at my wife lying wearily in the bed, and said, "Uh...Of course, it's genetic! That tired looking lady over there!" Throughout her childhood and even now as a young woman, she has always been our passionate child who feels deeply about everything. This has made her a lot of fun. And sometimes, somewhat challenging! How could this be with the same pair of parents and the same basic parenting style for both children in the same household? It must be temperament that is in-born, because I didn't have the chance to ruin her! She came out that way!

This is about temperamental differences, but also about hyperactivity a little bit, and the different ways we look at kids' behavior. In terms of hyperactivity, the 64 thousand dollar question is "I got this wild kid! What the heck is going on? (What the heck is wrong?). For another child, the question is why is he/she so careful and cautious in new situations? For another child, the question would be how could we help him/her do with his/her frustration? For still another child, the question may be why is it so easy for him/her when it is so much harder for other kids? Distinguishing temperament is important to help you understand that nothing is "wrong" -- there is nothing "wrong" with the child or the parent or teacher. Temperamental differences are entirely normal. There is both a range of temperaments and common combinations of temperamental traits. Temperament is definitely something going on that needs to be understood when examining behavior. How one deals with the child or situation is based on one's diagnosis of what is going on. With each diagnosis, there are assumptions of cause and assumptions for treatment or interaction or discipline and so forth, and implications and judgments about who/what the child is. And, there is a resultant tolerance for the behavior and the child. And, temperament absolutely applies to the behavior of adults as well. The previous article puts temperament into a hierarchy of examining behavior.



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AVOIDING MISDIAGNOSIS AND PATHOLOGIZING

Temperament and family systems issues are often the two areas that people misunderstand or misinterpret which can cause significant misdiagnosis and harm to children. Temperament and family systems issues often allow invested adults to avoid sliding into pathologizing children. This includes the ADHD -- attention deficit hyperkinetic disorder diagnosis. While this can be an important diagnosis to consider, often it is applied far too quickly and without the clinical rigor it should demand. In addition, it is a diagnosis that tends to lead to readily -- and in some cases, inappropriately to medication with stimulants. Even when medication is indicated, the behavioral approach to dealing with ADHD issues can be guided using the principles of the temperamental evaluation. When temperament is not understood and respected, it can lead to negative dynamics in the family or in the classroom. Parents or teachers falsely assume that the behavior is intentional and defiant, rather than due to the natural energy and temperament of a particular child. In addition, adults sometimes fail to take responsibility as to how their natural energy and temperament ignites, exacerbates, and otherwise interacts with certain children's energy and temperaments. On the other hand, adults also sometimes take too much responsibility for the "good" and positive behavior and relationships some children have when it is essentially about either a good match between those children and adults or a temperamentally easy child. A temperamentally easy child is easy to parent and easy to teach-- and relatively difficult to ruin!

Temperament is the natural, inborn style of behavior of each individual. It is the **how** of behavior, not the why. It should not be confused with motivation. The question is not "why does he behave a certain way when... but how does he/see behave when..." The particular style of behavior is innate for each individual. It is not produced by the environment; babies and children are not blank or empty slates that are filled through environmental influences. The environment and the behavior of a parent, a teacher, other adults, and eventually, peer and media and other cultural factors- can influence temperament and interplay with it, but it is not the original cause of temperamental characteristics.

THE DIFFICULT CHILD AND EFFECTS ON OTHERS

What happens with a difficult child? the wild child? There is often a vicious circle or cycle of wear and tear on both the child and those in intimate relationships with the child, such as parents, siblings, classmates and friends, and teachers. The primary caregiver takes on the greatest responsibility for caregiving of children (traditionally, the mother would be the primary caregiver) and can suffer a multitude of effects: bewilderment, exhaustion, anger, guilt, embarrassment, inadequacy, depression, isolation, victimization, lack of satisfaction, feeling trapped, over-involvement. In a two-parent family, the secondary caregiver (often the father in the heterosexual nuclear family) is not as active in direct caregiving, but drawn into the dynamic in a multitude of negative manners: the secondary caregiver feels shut out, questions what other parent is doing, the primary caregiver has no energy for the partner, and the primary caregiver can become jealous of secondary caregiver's relatively conflict relationship w/ the child. Siblings can get lost in the drama of the difficult child's behavior, as the difficult child draws an unusually disproportionate percentage of the energy of the parents. I once had a client -- a young man who exhibited the classic behavior of the Hero or Responsible One in the alcoholic family system. In the alcoholic family system, the alcoholism of one of the parents draws all the energy of both parents and leaves it to one of the children to take on the responsibilities of practical parent issues. This person is characterized as the Hero. However, as I examined his family history and experiences, there was



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no alcoholism or drug abuse among his siblings, his cousins, his parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents and great aunts and great uncles. A few sessions later, he mentioned how difficult his brother was when they were younger. It turned out that his brother was severely hyperactive and made life crazy for his parents. There was always a crisis and a drama for his parents to deal with because of his brother. As a result, someone else had to take care of the basic functioning of the household; he became the Responsible One. He became responsible for taking care of everyone else -- except for himself. This caused him problems in his relationships as he grew older.

TEMPERAMENTAL EVALUATION TRAITS

There are many different theories on temperament. "The Difficult Child" by Stanley Turecki is a very readable and understandable resource. The following temperamental traits are taken from his book, which is based largely on the work of Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas. There are other ways to look at temperament and other ways to break down temperamental traits. I have found this one to be very useful. Look at each of these traits and rank yourself and everyone else in your family. It is important to note that high or low in any trait is not implicitly good or bad. Also, there is not necessarily any absolute scale by which to rate people. The relative ranking of members of your family is the most important. With one couple I worked with, the husband rated himself high in the activity level trait and his wife medium in the same trait. His wife, on the other hand, rated him medium activity and herself, low activity. What was important and what they both agreed on was that he was higher in the trait than she was. What was subjectively high activity level versus medium activity level versus low activity level was not as important. When there are several family members, the ranking of the different traits becomes easier because often it is relatively easy to see how two family members are both similar in one trait while both being higher or lower than a third family member.

1. Activity Level: How active generally is the child from an early age?
2. Distractibility: How easily is the child distracted? Can s/he pay attention?
3. Intensity: How loud is the child generally, whether happy or unhappy?
4. Regularity: How predictable is the child in his/her patterns of sleep, appetite, bowel habits?
5. Persistence: Does the child stay with something he likes? How persistent or stubborn is s/he when wants something?
6. Sensory threshold: How does the child react to sensory stimuli: noise, bright lights, colors, smells, pain, warm weather, tastes, the texture and feel of clothes? Is s/he easily bothered? Is s/he easily over-stimulated?
7. Approach/withdrawal: What is the child's initial response to newness- new places, people, foods, clothes?
8. Adaptability: How does the child deal with transition and change?
9. Mood: What is the child's basic mood? Do positive or negative reactions predominate?



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The following is a chart that you can use for this temperamental evaluation.

TRAITS	SELF	SPOUSE	CHILD1	CHILD 2	CHILD3
1. Activity Level	—	—	—	—	—
2. Distractibility	—	—	—	—	—
3. Intensity	—	—	—	—	—
4. Regularity	—	—	—	—	—
5. Persistence	—	—	—	—	—
6. Sensory threshold	—	—	—	—	—
7. Approach/Withdrawal	—	—	—	—	—
8. Adaptability	—	—	—	—	—
9. Mood	—	—	—	—	—

TEMPERAMENTAL TRAITS EASY <-----> DIFFICULT

Activity Level	LOW <-----> HIGH
Distractibility	LOW <-----> HIGH
Intensity	LOW <-----> HIGH
Regularity	REGULAR <-----> IRREGULAR
Persistence	LOW <-----> HIGH
Sensory threshold	HIGH <-----> LOW
Approach/withdrawal	APPROACH <-----> WITHDRAWAL
Adaptability	GOOD <-----> POOR
Mood	POSITIVE <-----> NEGATIVE

Once you list and rank the traits for the entire family, you need to do a self-evaluation and evaluate your temperament for how well or how poorly the temperaments fit each other. Sometimes, it is very clear that there is a misfit between two members of the family, but the parent or other family member assumes that it is the other person who should and needs to change. It is important to recognize that as the adult (with the wisdom and experience!) comes the responsibility to make the changes and adaptations in the relationship. Each temperamental trait and the combination of traits create both potential strengths and challenges for the individual and relationships. Young children are often developmentally unable to self-monitor -- to be self aware of their temperament and their issues and how it affects their behavior and other people. In addition, there are also often developmentally unable to self-regulate -- to tell themselves what appropriate choices to make in order to be successful in their lives. It is the responsibility of the adults to monitor the children (and themselves) as to how their temperament creates problems versus opportunities for them and to regulate the children (and themselves) as to what choices to make in terms of their behavior. Theoretically, babies have 0% ability and responsibility to self-monitor and to self-regulate. Parents raise their children to become adults where they would have 100% ability and responsibility to self-monitor and to self-regulate. As adults consciously with love and caring monitor and regulate their children, they need to also explain to the children what they have observed and why they are requiring the children to behave. As they monitor and regulate, parents also need to educate their children to understand their temperaments. As with all personal issues, you cannot change with you do not own and cannot own what you're not aware of. As parents educate their children to understand the own their temperament, they enable their children to take



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responsibility to accentuate the strengths from the positive aspects of their temperament and to mitigate the challenges from the negative aspects of their temperament.

I'M A BIG GIRL NOW

One of my daughters was initially (temperamentally) low in persistence. If something was difficult, she had a tendency to give up on it. We experienced this problem early on with the normal processes of development. When she was about eight years old, she wanted to take piano lessons. We checked with her to see if she was really interested in piano lessons. She assured us enthusiastically (of course, enthusiastically is how she tended to express everything -- she was our passionate one!). We decided to go ahead and start her on lessons. After a couple of weeks, she became frustrated at her lack of immediate process and wanted to quit. We did not let her quit. We told her that she had to keep on trying. In addition, we also told her that she had a problem with being too ready to quit. That she needed to learn how to keep on trying -- to be persistent or else she would not be able to learn and get the things in her life that she would really enjoy and benefit from. She continued and ended up loving piano and taking lessons for several more years. When she was in the second grade, we checked to see if she wanted to play basketball with a recreational league. She said she really wanted to and we enrolled her in an organization that sponsored youth basketball. After a few weeks of practice, she decided she didn't like it and wanted to quit. We did not let her quit. We told her again, that she had to keep on trying -- that she needed to follow through on her commitment to the team and to really give it a chance in order to see if she really liked it, and if she would be good at it. She continued and ended up playing not only in the recreational league but also for her school team through middle school. Basketball proved to be a formative and wonderful experience for her. We not only monitored her and regulated her around her low persistence issue, we also educated her about her challenge in this area. We did not blame her or shame her, but consistently fed back to her about how this was a challenge that she needed to learn how to address. Basically, how in this particular case with this particular trait, that she needed to learn how to go against her instincts in order to have more positive experiences and outcomes. In the fifth grade, we went to a parent-teacher-child conference at school to discuss her academic progress. The teacher noted to us that she had experienced our daughter sometimes getting very frustrated at having a hard time with a particular assignment, but then applying herself with determination until she could do it correctly. Teasingly, I told her, "But I thought you gave up easily and liked to quit when things got hard?" With a big grin on her face, she replied, "I'm a big girl now!" The big girl had internalized that she had a challenge in her temperament regarding persistence, accepted the challenge, and successively self-monitored and self-regulated so that she could be successful. From 0% ability to self-monitor and self-regulate as a baby, she had moved strongly toward 100% ability.

Little girls and little boys become the girls and the boys -- become young women and men who have greater or lesser ability to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses and greater or lesser ability to make adaptations to be the most successful. Your awareness of your strengths and weaknesses, including temperamental traits is critical to helping them become aware and empowered to be the most successful. The next chapter will have more discussion about the specific traits and potential strengths and challenges for your child.



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Chapter 19

CHALLENGES OF TEMPERAMENTAL TRAITS AND COMBINATIONS

Why you doing this to me?

Ronald had been working all week as the director of a small preschool and day care program. 50 kids in the school, six to seven teachers to supervise, 50 sets of parents and associated siblings and family members and friends, a dozen prospective students and parents, a couple of vendors, and an occasional licensing or government representative. Finger paint, field trips, music (cymbals, rhythm sticks, bells, kazooos, drums, beautiful voices -- and not so beautiful voices!), tricycles, puzzles, playhouse games, dress ups, water play (and water messes), books, blocks, sharing, not sharing, discussions, arguments, fights, bumps and bruises, disinfectant and Band-Aids, happy kids, sad kids, mad kids, happy parents, mad parents, scared parents, happy teachers, good teachers, poor teachers, smiles and frowns, laughter and crying -- peace and calm, NOT!

Kim had been working all week as the kindergarten teacher of a small private school. 16 kids in her classroom, 15 other teachers, 20 sets of anxious parents, a couple of prospective students visiting the class, a couple of meetings with fellow teachers, parents, and the administration. Arts and crafts, field trips, music (cymbals, rhythm sticks, bells, kazooos, drums, beautiful voices - - enthusiastic voices!), puzzles, games, dress ups, water play (and water messes), books, lessons to teach, sharing, not sharing, discussions, arguments, fights, bumps and bruises, happy kids, sad kids, mad kids, happy parents, mad parents, scared parents, happy colleagues, good coworkers, poor, smiles and frowns, laughter and crying -- peace and calm, NOT!

Friday night, Kim and Ronald are home together. Finally, a break from work. Finally, some time together. Ronald says, "Hey, let's go out. Let's go dancing, or go bowling." Kim responds, "Why you doing this to me?" as she fixes him with a death stare! "Whaaat?! What do you mean, 'doing this' do you? What did I do?" a stunned and confused Ronald replies. (Based on a true story -- a true story that wasn't funny living as it happened!)

UNJUSTLY ACCUSED

What did Ronald (that's me!) **do** to Kim (that's my wife)? What was so awful about suggesting that they go out -- to do something fun like go dancing or go bowling? There was nothing awful about wanting to go out or wanting to spend time together doing something that would be fun for both of us. I was perfectly willing to do something else if it was something that she really wanted to do. But somehow, I was being accused of being insensitive, hurtful, intrusive, and causing winter flooding... and causing the melting of the Arctic ice cap! And just like Richard Kimball of "The Fugitive," I was appalled at been "unjustly accused!" Little did we realize at this relatively early time in our living together, that there was something that I "did" that disrupted my wife. While at that time, neither one of us really knew what it was and why it was so upsetting; Kim had an expectation that I would act properly anyway. In fact, when I asked, "What did I do?" she was unable to do give me an answer. She just knew that I had done "it!" And, she resented it! Unjustly accused, unjustly tried, unjustly condemned -- and unjustly punished! Boy, what she mad at me! And, boy, was I mad at her for being mad at me -- unjustly! Eventually, we figured out that there was a basic temperamental difference between us with respect to a particular trait that caused this particular confrontation and problem.



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Although, they both had been in weeklong work situations that exposed us and filled us both to tremendous amounts of stimulation that were fundamentally similar (administering a preschool program versus teaching kindergarten), our different sensory threshold levels created a differential effect on each of us. My wife was an outstanding kindergarten teacher: resourceful, sensitive, creative, dedicated, and hard working. However, compared to me she had a lower sensory threshold. While she was able to handle and deal with the incredibly high level of sensory stimulation (noise, physical stimulation, activity, and energy) of the kindergarten class and kindergartners, her capacity to hold such stimulation was not as great as mine. Obviously, she had a fairly high capacity to deal with such stimulation compared to many other people. There were many people, parents and even other teachers who would spend a few minutes in her classroom and eventually turn to her with wide eyes and say, "I don't know how you can handle this all day long!" with a certain amount of mixed respect and pity! On the other hand, I probably have an extremely high sensory threshold for noise and activity. When I was owning, directing, and teaching in our own preschool and day care program, there were periods (especially, in the early days of the business) where I would work the entire 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. schedule of the program on a regular basis. Rather than collapse after work, I might work out or play basketball with my friends. At the end of my workweek, I would have absorbed a comparable amount of stimulation, as she would have in her workweek. However, because I had a higher sensory threshold, I was still "good to go" and still had additional capacity to absorb even more stimulation -- such as go out and play as adults. On the other hand, Kim was "filled up" and was "running on fumes!"

At the end of a week, my sensory threshold allowed for more stimulation; an appropriate analogy would be that I had been "filled" with the stimulation line/waterline up to my chest. Obviously, there was plenty more capacity for more stimulation and activity. On the other hand, Kim sensory threshold had been reached; an appropriate analogy for her was that the stimulation line/waterline had come up to her nose, and she was desperately trying to keep her head from going under! My joyous, loving suggestion to go out was tantamount to dumping a huge barrel of stimulation/water on to her head as she was trying to keep from being submerged! How could I do that? "Why are you doing that to me?" becomes a relevant angry challenge from Kim if she believes that I know that she is struggling to keep herself from going under and I still am suggesting additional stimulation. What a jerk! I, of course had no idea that she was struggling to keep from being overwhelmed with the weekly stimulation, but had assumed that she was just fine because I was still just fine.

THE COSMIC YARDSTICK

In the classic Disney movie, "Mary Poppins", Mary Poppins pulls out a tape measure in the nursery. As she measures the two children, she reads from the tape measure, which points out various faults of character or personality. Then she holds it up to herself, and proclaims the tape's measure of her, "Mary Poppins, practically perfect in every way!" Each of us is vulnerable to having such a tape measure or something similar, which I call the cosmic yardstick. The cosmic yardstick is how we measure ourselves-- and other people. It is how we gauge our own other people's character and personality -- it is the critical analysis of how we measure up to our standards of morality and values. However, each person's cosmic yardstick often turns out to be a very personal yardstick of morality and values. Our personal standards of morality and values are inappropriately extended to and applied to other people without regard to their differing life experiences and formative models. As a result, no one ever measures up to the cosmic yardstick,



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because it really is a personal yardstick. Since I could endure and even enjoy a very high degree of stimulation and activity and still have the wherewithal to engage in additional stimulation and activity, I assumed by my cosmic yardstick that my wife should and would have the same kind of high sensory threshold. Since my wife felt overwhelmed and barely functional after enduring the very high degree of situation and activity of her workweek, she assumed by her cosmic yardstick that I would be just as overwhelmed as she was. Therefore, my suggestion to go dancing or go bowling was an obvious provocation and disrespect to overwhelm her even more.

Over the years, we were able to figure out this and other temperamental differences, and stop asking each other "Why are you doing this to me?" with the implicit answer of, "... because you don't care for me or respect me, you jerk!" Instead, we began to discover, understand, and accept that we had different levels in certain temperamental traits that were innate or firmly rooted. That, we were not "doing" anything to the other person, but expressing what was within our personalities and ourselves. With the discovery, understanding, and acceptance, we were able to rise to the challenges and make adaptations to make our relationship more successful. We were able to self-monitor and self-regulate ourselves and (with permission) cross monitor and cross regulate each other to respect the challenges and sensitivities of both individuals. Functionally, that meant in terms of sensory threshold; that I would not assume that Kim would be able to handle stimulation that I enjoyed and could handle; that Kim would not assume that I was trying to stress her purposefully; that I could restrain my energy at times out of respect for how it affected her; that she could extend or stretch herself at times when it was appropriate regarding energy and stimulation; I could be more supportive of her needing her time to recuperate de-stress; and she could be more self-aware to take the time and energy to nurture herself when she was stressed. And that we'll what avoid asking, "Why are you doing this to me?"

CHASING HER TO FINISH THE FIGHT

Once when I had finished presenting a workshop on temperamental differences and evaluations, a member of the audience brought up to me a temperamental evaluation of her family, specifically an evaluation of both herself and her sister when they were children. I had told people that if they had wanted to show me their temperamental evaluations of their families, that I would make some guesses as to what the dynamics were in the families. As I looked at her temperamental evaluation worksheet, I noticed that two traits stood out about her and her sister. For Intensity, she had rated her sister as being High, with herself as being rated Low. For Persistence, she had rated herself being High, with her sister being made it as being Low. I ventured a guess at their dynamics as children. I said to her, "When you and your sister had a fight or argument, initially she would react with great passion and intensity. She would be very upset and very adamant about what she thought and how she felt. You would tend to take it in, basically weathering the storm and considering what she said. Then your sister would want to end the fight and would attempt to walk away from you. At that point, you would chase your sister throughout the house trying to finish the fight! She would try to be done with it, but you would insist that you two come to some resolution." Her eyes widened with amazement and she said, "How did you know that? That exactly what happened all the time!" Her sister was higher in Intensity but lower in Persistence; she was lower in Intensity but higher in Persistence. Hypothesizing that her sister's High Intensity would cause her sister to emphatically present her issues initially but her sister's other trait- Low Persistence would not support her hanging in there to endure an extended battle. On the other hand, her Low Intensity would allow her to not be ignited and overreact to her sister's provocative



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High Intensity and then her High Persistence would cause her to want to stay engaged and finish the fight or argument... it was a logical conclusion or guess based on their temperamental traits.

ALWAYS WINS THE FIGHT

I will ask the audience (as I ask you) if in your family, there is someone who is both higher in Intensity and higher in Persistence than another person. If someone is both higher in Intensity and Persistence, then he or she always wins the fight. Why? Because such a person both brings more to the fight (Intensity or passion) and hangs in there for the entire 12 rounds (Persistence or endurance), he or she overwhelms the energy and patience of his or her adversary. Ironically, this may mean when one of your children comes to complain to you that his or her siblings, "Always gets what they want!" Your response may be, "If you were a little bit more wild eyed and more mule headed, you would be able to get what you want!" It would be important for you to be aware of this disparity in these two temperamental traits among your children (or between you and your spouse or partner, or among you and your colleagues). One person (a child, yourself, your partner, or a colleague) may be losing out in advocating for him or herself or in asserting him or herself as a result.

In the situation where it is your child or when you are supervising other people, you may need to monitor and regulate (blunt, mitigate, restrict, or otherwise slow down or dilute) the person who is higher in both Intensity and Persistence so that he or she does not inappropriately dominate the environment, attention, and/or resources; and also so that the person or people who are lower in both Intensity and Persistence have their voice, rights, and needs addressed equitably. In addition, you also may need to monitor and regulate (encourage, require, push, or otherwise prompt behavior change that will raise the normal Low Intensity and Persistence) the person who is lower in these traits, so that he or she will feel more successful, validated, and treated with justice. This person may slide into a hopeless or disempowered life perspective and live and function as a victim. He or she may do this quietly in a dismal life or may be self-righteously reactive in antisocial (but perhaps, passive aggressive) ways. In situations where it is you who is the High Intensity and High Persistence individual, you may want to examine the "costs" or consequences of your frequent victories on the overall social atmosphere of the community and on how other community members perceive you (perhaps, as a bully... as a spoiled favorite... as a pushy person?).

In situations where you are the Low Intensity and Low Persistence individual, you may want to stop complaining about how everyone else gets their way and how you are ignored, and consider how your temperamental traits may not serve you the best all the time in such situations and whether or not you should stretch your behavior past your temperamental norms in order to better benefit yourself. This process is the process of self-monitoring and self-regulating that acknowledges both the strengths and the challenges of your innate temperament as to its functionality (appropriateness or success) in diverse situations.

BUT... I DON'T KNOW HOW

As the adult or as an adult, you have the responsibility to monitor (recognize) and regulate (direct changes) both the children under your care and yourself to accentuate strengths and to mitigate challenges in temperamental traits. Some people are readily able to follow through on this requirement. However, some people as much as they would like to, will struggle and complain, "I know what I need to do... I know what is not working with my temperament (or my



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

child's temperament) in the situation... I know what needs to change for myself (or my child), but... I don't know how." Ironically, one of the temperamental traits also predicts a person's ability to meet the challenge of temperament -- that trait is Adaptability. If something does not work well or is not successful for a person with High Adaptability, he or she tends to readily adapt and figure out an alternate approach and attempt it. If the second approach or attempt does not work, a High Adaptability individual will come up with another alternate approach or attempt. Such a person will continue to do this because of his or her High Adaptability trait. Dealing with what works or doesn't work as a consequence of one's temperamental traits or profile is much easier with that High Adaptability trait. If someone has Low Activity Level and tends to get worn out so that they are not successful at work or school, but if he or she also has High Adaptability, then the individual would most likely make some adjustment to their schedule or routine to insure more rest and sleep to adequately deal with fatigue issues. If another individual has High Distractibility that causes him or her to lose focus studying or working, he or she with the High Adaptability trait would probably find or create a steady or work situation with minimal distractions in order to be more successful. A High Adaptability person who has a Low Sensory Threshold who tends to get over stimulated and potentially become overwhelmed will find and develop mechanisms to release stress during his or her daily activities (medication, breathing exercises, short breaks, and so forth). If on the other hand, an individual has the same temperamental challenges and tends to Low Adaptability, he or she won't know what to do.

Does this mean that someone with Low Adaptability is doomed to suffer from whatever temperamental misfit he or she has unfortunately been born with? Absolutely not. If you or your child has Low Adaptability in addition to some other temperamentally challenging trait or traits, then it is critical that you become **Resourceful!** Resourceful means that use other people's adaptability and creativity. It means that you use books, videos, appropriate professionals, and the wisdom of others to offer to you potential ideas, techniques, and approaches that might be more successful than what you have. What is worse than a child who has Low Adaptability? A child with Low Adaptability with adult caregivers with Low Adaptability! What is worse than a child with Low Adaptability with adult caregivers with Low Adaptability? A child with Low Adaptability with adult caregivers with Low Adaptability who are also not Resourceful! A child with Low Adaptability who have parents or adults who are High Adaptability, automatically has potential resources to help make for his or her difficulty in coming up with alternative approaches or ideas. Children often need their adults to be their resources. If such adults are also Low Adaptability, they can mitigate their difficulty coming up with alternative approaches or idea by becoming resourceful. That you are reading this indicates that you are willing to consider other resources. Good for you!