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| Instructor: | Philip Copitch, Ph.D. |

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COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. You will study a solid overview of how children build self esteem.
2. You will read real life examples of how children build self esteem.
3. You will study ways to teach a complicated subject to parents who are coming to you for help with their children.
4. You will experience the power of story as a cognitive-behavioral therapeutic tool.
5. You will see ways to demystify psychotherapy for your patients.

Tell me, I forget.

Show me, I remember.

Involve me, I understand.

Teaching Parents How To Build Their Child's Self Esteem



INTRODUCTION

I am a Cognitive Behavioral Family Therapist. I tend to teach parents valuable parenting lessons through stories. Stories that mirror skilled parenting and adaptive social skills.

I start by advocating, “I would think that you have lots of skills. My goal is to help you use your skills better and to add a few new ones—if we find that you need some support in one or two areas.”

At this point the new patient tends to relax a little and tells me one or two worries. It is common for parents to tell me that their children verbally lash out. That their children tend to use words as weapons and that regularly, they—the parents—worry about their beloved child’s “attitude.” I often hear, “I love her, but I can’t stand being in the same house with her!” or “He drives me crazy with his constant attitude!” The children can be little tykes or teaming teens. The size does not matter. When I hear parents talk about the “A” word I know that the child’s self esteem needs to be evaluated. (Actually, the whole family’s.) The “A” word usually is a symptom of a family with a low grade emotional fever. If dealt with now the fever is usually easily responsive to treatment. If left untreated it can grow into an ugly cancer that can destroy a family and the individuals that make up the family.

In this course we are going to look at how to teach parents about the role of words within their family and how to teach this in a way so that a loving parent can pick it up and use it. And I do mean use it. I find that the parents I work with are eager to try new ways of dealing with old problems; as long as I don’t try to stuff the new stuff down their throats. A major part of my therapy is teaching, but not in the high school or college way. I teach through stories. I tell vivid stories about solving problems. I want my patients to walk out of each session with solid information. For most parents, having a story to hold onto makes therapy a safe, nonthreatening teaching environment. I want them to be able to get their minds around the new concept without feeling like they are wading through science or psycho-babble. I teach in the way we humans have probably passed down important information since the beginning of the extended family.

As you continue, you will find stories and information intertwined. Often with families I have a set agenda to cover in a session. I estimate that about fifty percent of the time that preconceived session occurs. I often start it with something like, “I would like to talk with you about how your son Bobby deals with you. I’d like to look at ways to help Bobby get his needs met without him having to bang his head against yours every step of the way. Is that OK with you?”

The other half the time, my plan goes right out the window when the patient walks in and says something like, “My first hus-

A mom once told me, “I used to pray that my son would have a great mind. Now, I wonder if God is laughing at me. Sam can remember everything I tell him and he uses my own words against me.”

band showed up drunk to pick up Bobby...” In this situation I deal with the parent’s most pressing concerns.

Other times I can segue into a psychotherapeutic teaching mode (Cognitive Psychotherapy). “It sounds like you dealt with that pretty well, as we discussed last session, we were going to talk about how Bobby interacts with you, is this a good time for us to do that?”

You may have noticed, I tend to ask for permission before I move on. I find that most people feel safer and are much more receptive to my stories if I ask permission to control the conversation for a few minutes.

So, if it is OK with you, let’s talk about how children build their self esteem and how their parents can support this invaluable growth.

HOW TO BUILD YOUR CHILD’S SELF ESTEEM

WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT FOR YOUR CHILD?

We start off with a question fundamentally impossible to answer with one answer. At one moment the answer is, “I want my Sally to be happy.” Five minutes later... “I want Sally to have a college education.” Minutes later, “I want Sally to...” We have hopes and aspirations for our children. We wish them to be well educated, physically healthy, emotionally stable, and to care about us in our old age. The list is almost endless.

I asked parents over the course of a week, “What do you want for your child?” Their answers follow:

- to be happy
- to be safe
- to be smart
- to go to college
- to grow up and have a great life
- to be whatever he wants to be
- to have a better life than my parents could give to me
- to do well in school
- to be self confident
- to be thoughtful and kind
- to give to people less fortunate than herself
- to know and love God
- not to get into major trouble
- to have integrity
- to be honest

Children are poor men's riches.

English Proverb

Children in a family are like flowers in a bouquet: there's always one determined to face in an opposite direction from the way the arranger desires.

Marcelene Cox

When I look down this list I have to agree. I would think that most parents have a list that is a mile long of what they want for their children. But, let's look at this from the view point of our children. What pressure! What overwhelming, engulfing pressure. Our children are constantly being compared to our goals for them, our expectations.

Now, don't get me wrong. Without parental expectations most children and teens would have difficulty finding food. We need to have hopes and dreams for our children. But, we cannot deny that the goals and aspirations are dropped on our children's shoulders without warning. The weight of our hopes can be overwhelming to many young people.

What goal would you deny your child? We are in agreement that the list of our hopes is overwhelming, so what would you cross off your list? Would you put a line through, - ~~to do well in school~~ or - ~~to have integrity~~? I wouldn't think so. We all want the very best for our children.

WHAT IS THE SINGLE BIGGEST "GIFT" WE CAN GIVE OUR CHILDREN?

Hold on. Take a minute to think about this question. If you could give one and only one gift to your child, what would it be? Would you give your child financial riches? Would you give her beauty? Would you give him intelligence? If you could give only one thing that would give your child a leg up in life, what would it be?

I frequently read in the newspaper about the movie star who finds fame and fortune, only to end up in a drug treatment hospital. Or, the business money mogul who has three ex-wives and a few estranged children. We have heard of generals indicted for being stupid, presidents shamed into retirement, or the religious leaders who lead two different life-styles.

So, what is the best thing we can give our children? What "gift" can help a child in good and bad times? What one "gift" will help our children to avoid the horrors of drugs, stay level headed when good times roll in and keep perspective during life's pitfalls?

I propose that the best gift a parent can give a child is the home environment that allows their child to build a high self esteem. Research has shown us that children who possess a healthy self esteem deal with life in the safest ways.

If we as parents help our children to build a strong self esteem we give them the best internal tool to deal with their world. With the internal awareness of their own self worth, our children interact with the world with inner contentment and self assuredness. The side effect of our children having high self esteem is that they view the world through this high self esteem. As I will discuss later, high self

One caller blamed forces outside of our solar system for the behavior of today's youth. Even the host thought that was far fetched.

Over the years I have walked along the hallowed halls of many a university. Inevitably, the professors and students use signs and cartoons to share personal philosophies. A popular sign is the cynical view of scientific research. "Never let the facts interfere with your theories."

Not to have control over the senses is like sailing in a rudderless ship, bound to break to pieces on coming in contact with the very first rock.

Mahatma Gandhi

esteem is an emotional force field protecting our children in the chaos we call life.

DON'T GET LOST IN THE MEDIA HYPE

I recently heard a conservative radio talk show host rant and rave about liberals wasting money on building self esteem. He was very concerned that a school district had sanctioned a baseball coach for yelling at his losing team. He proclaimed that "the liberals are so worried about hurting some kid's self esteem that they are taking all the fun out of competitive sports."

The callers to the radio program spoke for the rest of the hour about how the schools, the churches, and our society as a whole were babying children, and making them feel good about doing mediocre and substandard work. One caller explained that the youth of today were "all stupid and useless." He was sure that if parents whipped their kids when they acted up they would know right from wrong and we just wouldn't have to worry about stuff like self esteem and feelings.

As the radio talk show continued it became obvious that the callers were really angry with the youth of America. Words like "whiny" and "cry baby" were used to define today's teens. "Spoiled" and "selfish" were pinned on the younger children. Callers blamed the teachers, the parents, and the government. The words "self esteem" seemed to be used as a negative. As if "self" or "esteem" were bad words. The radio talk show host stated that, "We have a dumbing down of our schools. Teachers give grades to build self esteem, not based on what kids learn."

Bashing children, schools and parents may make a stimulating topic for a talk show, but it is not helpful. It misses the truth. It misses the essence of society.

The vast majority of people work very hard to get along with others. Most parents truly care about their children and wish to parent well. Most children love and respect their parents. Unfortunately, we tend to hear only about the negative. Would a talk show or a newspaper keep its audience involved with the following topics:

Mrs. Smith reads to her three children almost every night.

Or,

Mr. Jones' child has never been in a fist fight at Smallville Elementary School

The reality is that most people are caring, hard working people. In fact, most of us are still striving for the things our parents hoped

for us. And yes, even as adults, our own parents' goals for us, along with our own aspirations, can feel overwhelming.

HOW IS SELF ESTEEM BUILT?

Let's start off by defining what we are talking about. Self esteem goes by many names. Some call it self worth, others self-confidence. The high brow academic set use words like, "the sense of self " or "ego identity." Shakespeare said it best, "A rose, is a rose, is a rose," or something like that. The reality is that we all know what high self esteem or low self esteem look like, but it is hard to put it into words.

In a nut shell, self esteem is the internal belief we hold about ourselves. What makes it hard to understand and put into words is that it is ever changing. We hold different internal beliefs about our abilities dependent on the situation.

For example, my five year old son informed me that he couldn't pick up a hat in the side yard because of spiders. He hadn't seen any spiders but he was obviously uncomfortable. When he was reminded that he had touched spiders before, he said, "Yeah, but that spider was not hiding to get me!" Is this a self esteem issue? In a way. If, at five, Joshua felt comfortable enough within himself to handle the fears that he pictured, I would not have had to pick up the hat. But, is it a self esteem problem? Definitely not. Josh was not saying to himself, "I'm not able to pick up the hat." He was saying, "I'm afraid of spiders hiding under the hat and attacking me." Often parents confuse low self esteem with fear.

The internal belief we hold about ourselves is somewhat situational. Your child may feel that she is the best baseball player since Babe Ruth, but be uncomfortable about joining the team because she doesn't know any of the other players. When we talk about self esteem, it is important to listen to the child's words. If we focus too much on the child's behavior we often miss the true picture.

So, when we talk about self esteem we are really talking about the internal balance of our beliefs of self worth.

When we are born we enter the world with a personal makeup. This personal makeup is usually called our temperament. The newborn interacts with his world through his temperament.

Newborns seem to be "pre-wired" to investigate their world. Part of their temperament is to investigate and eventually build relationships with their new world.

Infant research has shown that newborns have the ability to "interact" with their caregivers from the first moments of birth. Their eyes are developed enough to focus on their mother's face during the first breast feedings. Infants are able to smell and remember their caregivers.

During the first week of school, eight year old Thomas came home stating that "school was boring." Five year old Eric seemed to love his first days in kindergarten. He ran up excitedly and said, "We did numbers. We had recess. We did story." However, his mother was concerned when Eric then parroted, "It was boring". When mom asked, "What does boring mean?" Eric replied, "Thomas says it, I think it means sweaty."

Instead of saying that man is the creature of circumstance, it would be nearer the mark to say that man is the architect of circumstance. It is character which builds an existence out of circumstance. From the same materials one man builds palaces, another hovels; one warehouses, another villas; bricks and mortar are mortar and bricks until the architect can make them something else.

Thomas Carlyle

The individual's temperament is influential in the formation of the feeling of self worth. We take this sense of self with us throughout our life. For example, a sixty year old can truly say that they are the same, but still a different person than they were when they were six. Our feelings of self worth are with us for a lifetime.

THE BIRD NEST

Recently my family and I watched a Discovery Channel program about birds from around the world. The narrator explained how different birds build their nests. Some birds simply moved around a patch of dirt and called it home. Other birds carried twigs and grasses up into a tree and intertwined them to make a nice basket. One swallow carried beak-fulls of mud, making a substantial "clay" pot to call home. A hyper little fellow swiped spider webs and sewed the sides of leaves together making a sturdy green hammock. The birds did all this by instinct. Each of the different birds was pre-programmed with the innate ability to build their species specific nest. This is impressive.

We all build our self esteem in a similar fashion. We pick and choose from our environment to form our belief of who we are. Our temperament tends to initiate the direction of what we notice. Then, as time goes by, our temperament is intertwined with our experiences to form the "self." Most researchers believe that the self is pretty much built by age two. Then, by age three we start an internal dialog with ourselves and we develop our opinion about who we are. This is the onset of self esteem.

THREE BASIC LEVELS OF SELF ESTEEM

Most people think of self esteem as either high or low. It is important to understand that self esteem is a continuum. No one really has a truly high self esteem, rather they tend to possess mostly high feelings of self worth and an understanding about their limitations. Similarly, individuals with low feelings of self worth believe poorly about themselves in most situations, but are able to get by and outwardly function in their world. They perceive themselves through low esteem glasses, reaching medium esteem in a few limited areas of their life. Figure 1 illustrates the continuum of self esteem.

There are three basic levels of self esteem— high, medium and low.

HIGH SELF ESTEEM

A person with high self esteem feels comfortable in most situ-

ations. She tests her beliefs and has had experience trusting her belief system. She is self confident. She is aware that she thinks well on her feet. She knows that even well developed plans often need minor corrections. She is internally assured that she can deal with life's ups and downs. She is aware that she does not have all the answers while, at the same time, she knows deep in her soul that she can figure out most of the answers she will need.

An example of high self esteem:

Ellen is twelve years old. She is a hard working student who is somewhat bored in school. She is happy most of the time. Her parents are sure that she is a "good kid" who tends to be argumentative with them. "She is always testing my limits," her mother told me. "But then again, she plans to rule the world." Ellen feels good about herself and safe within her relationship with her parents. She has goals and dreams. She practices her growing skills on her parents. She chooses to back down when her parents give her firm limits.

MEDIUM SELF ESTEEM

People with medium self esteem are constantly questioning themselves. They know that they have done well but are never really sure if it was their doing or maybe just simple dumb luck. These people tend to have a hollow drivenness. It is not so much a quest for challenge, as in the high self esteemer, it is a never ending test of themselves, to see if they can cut the mustard. This need to prove themselves tends to be very taxing, removing much of the potential enjoyment from even doing well. Individuals with medium self esteem are constantly in self doubt.

An example of medium self esteem:

Milly is an outgoing, happy go lucky, girl of nine. Her parents describe her as "flighty" and "irresponsible." "She is so smart," her mother told me, "that it infuriates me that she screws up all the time." Milly seems to want help constantly. She needs others to direct her. She tends not to follow these directions, preferring to muddle her way through. She puts a lot of energy into almost getting things done, into almost taking control of her world.

LOW SELF ESTEEM

People with low self esteem are positive that they are doomed. They believe that any thought they have will prove to be stupid. Self hate is the reality of people with low self esteem. This self hate leads to the use of societal anesthesia. This anesthesia tends to take the form of one or more of the following: social isolation, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, or severe risk taking. Their mantra is "I don't care." And it is true for them. This internal

When playing on the old tractor, Josh meticulously positioned himself on the seat, fastened the seat belt and called for his big brother to come for a "ride." Big brother happily jumped up on the tractor wheel cover. Josh announced, "I'm Dad." "Where are we going Dad?", Ethan played along. Josh summoned his deepest dad voice, "Son, you know you're not allowed to play on the tractor, what other choice can you make."

Our children are listening. Be careful what you are saying.

One kid told me that his mother's pet line when leaving a store was, "I feel like I'm baby-sitting the world some days."

pain drives them to wish out of a relationship even with themselves. They often mistreat caring individuals in their world. They take the attitude, "If you care for me you deserve whatever I do to you."

People with low self esteem have no respect for themselves and only contempt for anyone who cares about them.

Two examples of low self esteem:

Charles is a chubby boy of twelve. He spends large portions of his day getting noticed by moping around. His mother explains, "He sits around all day, wanting. His teacher tells me he is bright, but he does very little in school." When I first met Charles, he was polite and talkative. He spoke of his dreams and goals. It was quickly apparent that he was positive, at the core of his being, that he would never come close to any of his dreams.

Tyler is a muscular eleven year old referred to my office by juvenile probation. His nickname is "Bull," short for "The Bulldozer." He proudly explained, "Everyone calls me 'Bull' because I push people around. I like to fight. I can beat up everyone in my school, even the eighth graders." Tyler's mother has been asked to find another school. She explains, "Bull is a good boy. He just has a bad temper, like his father. He doesn't mean to hurt anyone, he just doesn't want to be told what to do."

What you are thunders so
that I cannot hear what you
say to the contrary.

Ralph Waldo
Emerson

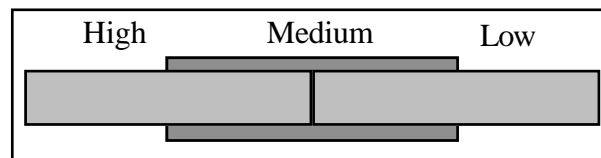


Figure 1: The continuum of self esteem

Now for the good news...

The information discussed up to now, can be painful for many parents. At this point they need to hear that there is hope, in fact, lots of hope. Many parents feel guilt ridden prior to starting therapy. Once they start to understand the role of self esteem in their child's life, they can be very hard on themselves. It is important not to let a parent leave session without the next page of information. If we open a discomfort, it is important that we place a secure band-aid on it before we send the parent back out into the real world.

SELF ESTEEM IS NOT CAST IN STONE

One of the most important jobs of a parent is to provide the best building material for the growing self esteem of their child. Just as the bird forages for twigs, grasses, or mud, your child searches his environment for the stuff of self esteem. At first this

information gathering process occurs mostly with his caregivers. In time other influences grow in your child's life.

Research has shown us that newborns “pick up” on the feelings in their home. We know that children who are physically cared for, but whose home is in emotional turmoil tend to be prone to stomach unrest, headaches, and sleep disturbances.

Mrs. Rodriguez was going through a messy divorce with her abusive husband. Her six month old daughter was seen by her family doctor three times in one week for diarrhea and concerns of dehydration. Mrs. Rodriguez told me, “The doctor said all the tests came back normal. My baby was just fine. Then he whispered to me, ‘Mary, I’m just a country doctor, but how about you send the baby to your mother’s. Maybe she is all tied up in knots because of the family problems.’ I told him that me and my husband don’t argue in front of the baby, but I sent Alexa to my mother’s anyway. You know, it was a miracle, she slept on the couch for the first fourteen hours. She got as big as a horse in just a week.”

I think there is a lot to be said for country doctoring. Babies and young children are so dependent on their caregivers that it makes sense to me that they are critically attuned to them and their emotional states.

As parents, we can influence our children’s self esteem by providing the correct self esteem building blocks. At about the time your child can recognize his own name, he is starting to search his world for information about himself. This information is in the form of verbal and nonverbal messages.

I once asked a young man, who just got an acceptance letter to college, how his mother reacted to the good news. He said, “She is very happy. But, she always told me I was special.” “Special?” I questioned. “Yeah, she always told me I was special, you know that I could put my mind to something and figure it out.” “When did she tell you that you were special?” I continued. “Boy, knowing my mom, she probably patted herself on her belly and said, ‘Whoever you are ... you’re special to me.’” He smiled a big proud smile and I knew he was special. Why? Because I believed his mother.

Your child believes you, at least in the beginning. In fact, many child specialists point out that infants and young children perceive their parents to be “godlike.” So, what are you saying to your children? What are you feeling towards your children? They are listening, intently.

WORDS COUNT

Over the years I have asked most new patients, adults and children alike— “What did (do) your parents say to you the most?” The following are the most common answers:

Without knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know men.

Confucius

The best time for you to hold your tongue is the time you feel you must say something or bust.

Josh Billings

Mrs. Trudeau was very upset when I allowed her daughter to write in her workbook. She explained that she learned in school that books were not made to be written in. She was so upset, that she went as far as to ask if I went to school, then she caught herself and said, “Oh, I’m sorry Dr. Phil, I know you went to school ... but did you have books?”

THE POSITIVE SOUNDING LIST

You're so good
You're so beautiful
You're so smart
You can do it if you try hard enough
You're so creative
You could do anything you put your mind to
You can be anything you want to be
I didn't have the breaks you will have
You're an angel
You're a gift from God
You've got such a pretty face
You're so kind to others

THE NEGATIVE SOUNDING LIST

You're stupid
You're clumsy
You're selfish
You act so naughty
You're bad
You're ugly
You're fat
You're evil
You act so silly
Can't you make real friends
You're so disrespectful
You always wake up in a really bad mood
You're just like... (disliked relative)
You're driving me crazy
Are you trying to make me flip out the
rest of the way?
If your head wasn't attached you'd lose it

Your child absorbs the millions of messages that you give him day after day, year after year. Your child hears the words of your messages and the innuendo, the "between the lines," of your sentences.

Let's do a short four part homework assignment to see what messages you give and/or receive.

Homework is usually given to parents to work on between sessions. I emphasize to patients that it is important to get more accomplished than a one hour session allows.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT PART 1

Ask yourself what were your parents' pet statements when frustrated with you as a child. It tends to be the statement you tease them about behind their backs now. Please write your answers below.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT PART 2

Ask your children what pet statements you use when frustrated with them. [Parents of very young children find that by observing their child playing they can fill this section out.] Please write your answers below.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT PART 3

Evaluate Part 1 for the hidden meaning. Please write your answers below.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT PART 4

Evaluate Part 2 for the hidden meaning. Please write your answers below.

Court ordered therapy is when a judge tells an individual that he needs to see a therapist for a particular psychological problem. In most cases the court ordered patient is not receptive to therapy. He sees the therapist as part of the court and feels contempt for the process. One teen put it very simply, "You can lead a person to the bathroom but you can't make him pee!"

Most parents are somewhat embarrassed by the hidden messages that they find. You shouldn't be. In fact, you should feel proud that you are looking inward. It shows that you care a lot about your child by the fact that you are evaluating yourself. Only positive can come from your caring enough to look at your own parenting skills.

We will revisit this homework assignment in Chapter 3 when we investigate communication choices.

SELF ESTEEM AND BEHAVIOR COMPLIMENT EACH OTHER

In many cases, self esteem is a self fulfilling prophecy. If your child believes that she can or she cannot accomplish something she tends to be correct. Your child absorbs the millions of messages that are given to her day after day, year after year. If the message is "you are lovable" your child has a wealth of building material. If the message is, "You are inconvenient or bothersome," the building blocks are weak and non-supportive.

Dr. Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) conducted research into human needs. His research showed that humans have a hierarchy of needs. The most powerful "basic need" is survival. This means, when in life threatening circumstances humans will do whatever it takes to prevent hunger and thirst. Once the survival-oriented needs are met, humans focus on secondary needs such as our impulse towards freedom, goodness and justice. Maslow believed that the highest secondary need is self awareness. For a child to comprehend his own abilities his self esteem must be high.

Let's look again at the four children we met earlier. As you recall, Ellen, age 12, possesses a high self esteem. Milly, age 9, has a medium self esteem. Charles, age 12, and Tyler (Bull), age 11, are children with low self esteem. Let's look at how their behaviors and self esteem are intertwined.

TYLER (BULL)

Bull is a very intelligent child who is, what most people would call, an "unwanted child." Not that his mother didn't want him, she surely loves him, it's just that Bull has been parented by absentee parents. His mother has had a long term drinking problem. His father's involvement has been virtually non-existent. When I first met Bull, he had just been kicked out of his fourth school and his eleventh foster home. Bull could not recall the names of all of his "moms and dads." He boasts 33 brothers and sisters, all short term relationships from foster home to foster home. When I first asked him what people thought of him, he was very matter of fact, "No

A therapist friend of mine has a poster in her office that reads, "It's easier to build a child than repair an adult."

one likes me ... They are afraid that I'm going to cut their livers out." The county probation officer (number 6) told me that "...this is one hard kid. He is as tough as a 30 year convict." He said frustratedly, "I can't find a home for this kid, he is so self confident, he walks all over foster parents."

The people in Bull's life, confused bravado with high self esteem. Bull had grown a pretend self. He wore this pretend self like armor. He walked through his world pushing people away, making sure that they never found out how scared and alone he really was. Bull had a favorite line he used when angry. He would make his angry face and screech, "I'll cut your liver out!" This had worked to get him out of many a classroom and foster home. The Juvenile Court judge was very concerned by these outbursts and court ordered therapy. During our second therapy session, Bull and I prepared liver and onions. The process of preparing the calf liver was very emotional for Bull. He was disgusted with the tactile experience. He was brought to tears before we cut a single onion. He wept and told me that he had never thought about what he was really saying.

Thirty days later, at a group meeting at Juvenile Hall, a child care worker spoke of how polite Bull was. When I asked how often he was threatening to cut people's livers out, the worker said, "Bull? He never talks like that." During this same meeting, Bull asked if we would start calling him "Tyler."

CHARLES

Charles is a chubby child who basically refuses to move unless he has to. His favorite thing to do is sit around and be in the way. He has this "in the way activity" down to a science. For a non active child he works very hard to be noticed. During our third therapy session, I asked Charles what he wanted for his life. He looked down and said I would laugh. With much encouragement Charles told me, "I want to be in a wheelchair." He explained that he wants to be broken from the neck down. "If I'm in a wheelchair, people will have to take care of me ... I can just sit and no one can make me do anything."

People with low self esteem, are positive that they are useless. They are consumed with self hate. The attitude of "I don't care" is easier than having to fail and be disappointed again.

There is no such thing as a "self-made" man. We are made up of thousands of others. Everyone who has ever done a kind deed for us, or spoken one word of encouragement to us, has entered into the makeup of our character and of our thoughts, as well as our success.

George Matthew
Adams

I have a sign in my office that simply states: Process Counts.

PeopleToons by PC



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"I think I'm in trouble. Mom said I was 'the poster child for birth control.' "

MILLY

Milly is an attractive girl with long, dirty blond hair. She has a big smile that she contorts into silly faces reflecting her moods. Milly is an outgoing follower. She seems to choose her mood depending on the people she is with. She is driven to be accepted by her peers. Milly is a child with many unrecognized talents. Unfortunately, she is filled with self doubt. She does not trust in herself, choosing other's opinions of her over her own. Her need for this constant approval of others tends to get her into trouble with adults. Her parents see her as not trying to accomplish or even as "...just silly Milly."

People with medium self esteem tend to feel uncomfortable most of the time. Even when things are going well for them, they are pushing to obtain the acceptance of others. Due to nagging self doubt, they are dependent on others for emotional stability.

ELLEN

Ellen is an intelligent child raised in a lower income family. She respects and appreciates her parents. Due to illness, Ellen's family has had more than their fair share of turmoil.

When I asked Ellen about her world, she explained that she was luckier than most. Her attitude was quite simple. "My parents are important to me. I am important to them. So, I must be an important person." This self confidence permeates her life. She knows that she can problem solve quite well but, if she gets into difficulty, she can turn to her parents for support. Please note the word "support." She knows that her parents support her. Ellen does not expect her parents to solve her problems. She knows that is her job. She looks to her parents for advice. And, according to her mother, most of the time she doesn't adhere to it.

People with high self esteem make life choices based on feeling important and cared for.

JUST A THUMB NAIL SKETCH

These four children are just a thumb nail sketch of three basic esteem profiles. As you recall, we discussed earlier that self esteem is a continuum open to change. Unfortunately, low self esteem has a spiral effect to it. Low self esteem tends to be a behavioral black hole sucking the life out of a person. High self esteem tends to lead towards making sound life choices.

THE PARENTAL ROLE OF NURTURING

By definition, the word nurturing means to bring up, to sustain.

Even the gods love jokes.
Plato

When we think of parenting we tend not to think of the minimal role but the expansive role of being a wonderful parent.

A teen made it very clear to me once when I asked her about her father. She explained, “I don’t have a father. I had a sperm donor.” Other teens have taught me that a *father* or *mother* is the person who makes your life possible, but a *dad* or a *mom* loves and cares for you.

Over the years, it has always impressed me that children with limited parental support can develop high self esteem. Marcus, a third year college student, told me about Mr. Harlum, his high school shop teacher. Marcus had no family to speak of. He lived his high school years in a foster home with fair but non loving foster parents. He explained his sense of family. “I never felt like I belonged. Then I met Mr. Harlum. I was just another street kid looking to go nowhere fast. Mr. H. taught me that I was somebody. He liked me for me. So now, I think of what Mr. H. would suggest I do. I find this very helpful so I don’t do dumb stuff.”

Marcus taught me that in as short a time as a shop class, over the course of a few years, you can learn that you count. That if Mr. H. says you are worth caring about, you surely are.

THE ART OF BEING A CARING PARENT IS FOCUSING ON YOUR CHILD

The art of being a caring parent cannot be underestimated. It is important that your children *feel* that you truly see them for who they are and that you don’t just observe their behavior.

Many parents feel as if they are constantly putting out forest fires. They feel that they do not really get to parent, they only get to keep the family from burning down the home. In the next section we will look at how to focus on what really counts and how not to be distracted by the hot spots of hopelessness and frustration.

GIVING THE GIFT OF HIGH SELF ESTEEM

In this section we will look at five major parental focal points that help to instill the gift of high self esteem in our children. In general, these focal points form the *attitude* of our parenting.

For example, I was asked to attend an activity on a Friday night. I was interested in going. In fact, I would have enjoyed going. It was easy to decline the invitation due to the fact that my family and I had prior plans. The prior plan stemmed from the decision, many years ago, to have a “family night.”

A family night is just what it sounds like, a night for family. No matter how hectic the week is, no matter how chaotic the world is around us, Friday night we think small and peaceful. We, as a family, share each other’s time and attention.

Family night was a conscious choice we made to insure that my wife and I do not lose track of what matters. By making this one decision, we actually have made millions of other choices.

By choosing the family we have chosen not to go our separate ways. We have chosen not to take work assignments that take us away from our children. We have chosen not to bring work home on Friday night. We have chosen not to attend an adult activity. The ripple effect of this one choice is infinite.

My wife and I made this choice based on what really counts to us. It is based on the role we wish to play in our children's lives. Our number one goal is to be good and caring parents. With this fact in mind, we are able to focus on what will help us accomplish this goal. We need to assist our children in developing and maintaining high feelings of self worth. By knowing what we really want we are able to meet our goals.

As a therapist, I often see parents who are drawn away from their family by other goals that are very important to them. On one hand, they wish to be good and caring parents, while on the other hand they also wish to achieve in their job or their social group. This type of conflict can destroy a family. Recently, one father was so angry with his 16 year old daughter that he slapped her when he found her lying. He consulted with me initially because he felt like a failure and he was concerned that he was losing his daughter to the streets. During the first family session it was obvious that the members of this family truly loved each other. When I asked what the number one problem was, the family consensus was, time. Father felt he was being pulled in all directions, mainly work and home. Mother felt that she was a taxi cab driver with no real life. And all three children complained about constantly being nagged at to hurry up or complete some task. Near the end of this first family session the father and 16 year old daughter started to talk about not feeling wanted. Father was heart felt about just being a cash cow or a decision maker and daughter was in tears about how her father was always at work even when he was at home.

This highly functioning family had lost its reason to be a family. That reason is mutual support and closeness. By week three of family therapy, this family made only one notable change. This one change had a ripple effect of happiness and family security. The one change was to have a scheduled dinner time three times per week.

Let's look at how we can build self esteem through some simple choices.

SHOWING ONE'S LOVE

For your child to experience high self esteem, he must experience your love for him. It is not enough for you to love your child.

Your child must “know” that he’s loved by you. It is the perception of the child that counts. You need to expose your child to your love in such a manner that he believes, at his core, that he is *lovable*. This sounds so simple, but like many things that are seem simple the doing is very hard.

Most parents start family therapy from the emotional standpoint, “I love my child.” In fact I often hear, “ I love him so much ... Why does he act this way!”

Your focus needs to be, “Does my child feel and experience my love?” This feeling and experience are the cement between parent and child that holds the self esteem building blocks together. Dorothy Briggs, author of Your Child’s Self-Esteem, puts it clearly, “No child can *feel* lovable if he does not *experience* love.” It is imperative that we interact with our children in a way that they feel and experience our love.

I was fortunate to take a course in graduate school from Dr. Jeffrey Smith, a celebrated psychologist and long time professor at Stanford University. When I showed up to my first class I had no idea who the instructor was. He arrived a few minutes early and very slowly walked to a chair at the front of the room. He sat slowly. He spoke softly. He explained that he was an old man. He had a terminal disease and he hoped to be alive long enough to teach this 18 week course. He apologized for his frailty. He explained that he would understand if anyone would like to transfer to another instructor. He spoke about looking forward to meeting all of us young people. (Most were in their thirties.)

Dr. Smith captivated the class. It was obvious to us that he wanted to die as he lived, a teacher. He let us know that we were special to him, that his world had greater meaning because we were a part of it.

Dr. Smith allowed us to experience his love. Soon after the course ended, Dr. Smith died. His wife mailed us our final exams. Until the end, Dr. Smith taught. He took the time to write a note on each final exam. My note was hard to read. The hand that penned it was weak. He wrote, “I like to think of you, by contrast, with your strong, positive spirit, working with children, Jeffrey”

The people you love need you to let them *feel* your love. Only when our children feel our love can they experience the fact that they are *lovable*.

THE ROLE OF TIME

America is a nation preoccupied with “doing.” Parents often explain how they show their love for their children with their list of “doing.” You know what I mean. “Well, I take Suzy to piano, then drop Scotty off at the soccer field. Then I buzz across town to pick up Sally to take her off to Youth Leadership at the church.” This is

There is qualitative difference between being looked at and seen.

Dorothy Briggs

all well and good, but as many a bumper sticker will attest, this is taxiing. We must not let ourselves confuse “doing” with “being.” When we *do* we are aiming at the completion. When we are *being* we are experiencing the wholeness of the activity.

Think back to your courtship days. You demanded time together. You enjoyed just *being* with the other person. This is how we humans show our caring for another. We simply say, with our actions, “I wish to be with you rather than doing anything else in the whole wide world.” This attention is the “quality” time that builds relationships. One mom put it, “Life is the moments.” I must agree wholeheartedly, *life is built on small moments*.

Your child absorbs your love in these small moments. The slight hug, the wink at the dinner table. The approving nod, the supportive “no.” Yes, that is right, these small moments are not always “yeses,” often they are supportive and definite “no’s.”

Most contact with our children tends to be in the “do” mode. We really have no choice. If you don’t push a kid out of the house at 7:03 the school bus leaves at 7:06 without him. We must remind ourselves to experience the small moments. If we do not remind ourselves, the hustle and bustle of the real world will infect us. We will become taxi cab drivers ferrying lonely little people from soccer practice to swim lessons.

How do we make sure that we do not get caught up in the rush? By planning and adjusting our attitude. If I’m in a rush, I can’t enjoy shopping with my three year old. Shopping with a happy hyper helper is at least 25% more time consuming than shopping alone. All my hoping is not going to change this fact of three year old dynamics. So, I have to plan and adjust my attitudes. This attitude shifting skill, keeping in mind the big picture, is the true art of parenting.

Behavior and words need to match. For example, when you say to your child, “It’s time to go,” you also need to move towards the door. When you say, “It’s time to go,” but you stand there talking to a friend or watching one last football play, you teach your child that your words do not count. Your actions tend to have more power than your words.

Gerri Copitch

BUILDING TRUST

We all need to know that we can trust our loved ones. Without this trust, people feel like they are walking around their own home on egg shells. Basically, what trust means is that we can predict how someone will act in a given situation.

Trust is learned. We learn whether we can or cannot trust another by observing the same-ness of the another’s words and actions. Even very young children key into this word and action same-ness. All things being equal, children will believe the behavior over the words of their parents. *Behavior counts*.

One thirteen year old girl, while talking about visitation scheduling, told her father very coldly. “You say that you will pick me up at nine in the morning, but you show up at ten.” Without knowing it she was telling her father that she did not trust him. She did not feel special to him. Trust is a very difficult feeling to earn and it is quickly

lost. The quickest way to lose your child's trust is through double messages. These double messages are usually subtle. But remember, your child's job is to understand her world so she has almost infinite patience to observe and learn who you really are.

Mrs. Cole sat in my office and was very upset. She explained that her three children did not respect her. She was just a maid. She "hated" to go home. She found herself finding things at work to do after hours so that she didn't have to go home to her bickering children.

When I asked Mrs. Cole how come she thought her home was so uncomfortable she snapped, "Oh, I know, I hear it all the time. My kids are like a broken record, 'Mom you said ... You lied!'"

As it turned out, Mrs. Cole was constantly feeling cornered by her children. She had learned to just say yes to get the kids out of her face, to postpone the situation. Then, when she felt stronger or just had to say "no" her kids pulled out their pet scream ... "Mom you said. You lied!"

We need to make sure that our words and our actions match. When I was in the "Super Store" buying a case of something I don't have room to store— I heard, "If you hit your brother one more time, I'll spank you so hard!" I hear this inconsistent statement all the time. (I even half joke that the stores should have a verbal abuse check out, or a "swat you until you learn" area.) Telling a child that hitting is wrong by threatening to hit is extremely inconsistent. The following are some typical inconsistent statements parents have told me about just this week in sessions:

I told Bobby that smoking was bad for him. I told him that the next time I caught him smoking I would make him eat a whole cigarette.

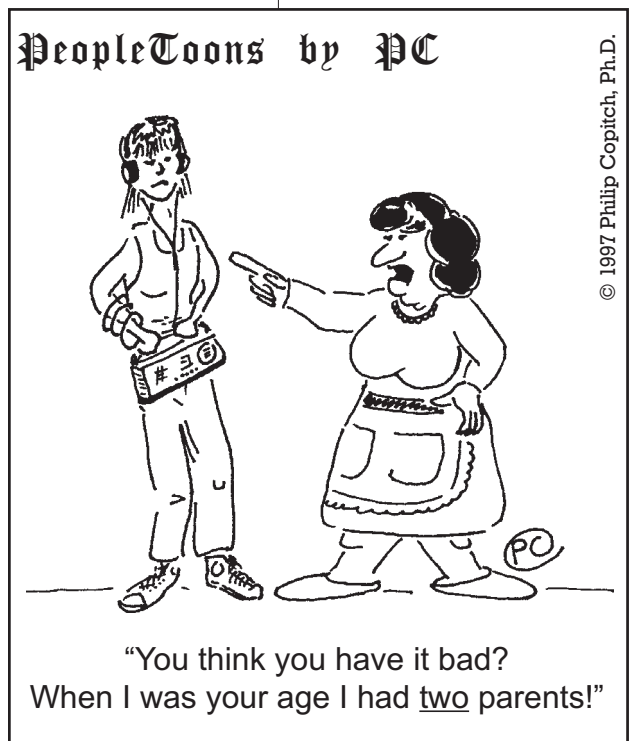
Sara is such a little boss that I told her to shut up, and I really meant it this time!

Michael is over 18. If he thinks he is a man... I told him that I expect him to start paying rent. I was so pissed at his room... I told him he owes me \$25 a month or he'd better start looking for a new place to live!

I told him... "How would you like it if I poked you?" Then I poked him right in the chest ... He is so damn dumb, he didn't learn, You know what that kid did? He spit right in my face!

Children begin by loving their parents. After a time they judge them. Rarely, if ever, do they forgive them.

Oscar Wilde



The parents depicted above are all caring concerned individuals who really wish to do the best for their children. Unfortunately, the only one really listening to the messages between the words are their children.

Our children need to experience their parents as real people. We destroy trust by putting on the airs of a role. For example, one common area where parents put on an act is with adult problems. After a disturbing phone conversation, your child may ask what's wrong. Many parents will actually lie to their child and say, "Oh, nothing." This act of trying to protect your child actually erodes the trust you have built. I am not saying that you should share the details of your adult world. What I'm saying is that you need to be honest and caring. "Oh, I'm upset ... I need to be by myself for a few minutes." This respects your child and teaches a real life lesson, that even adults have feelings that they need to figure out. This way your behavior, your sad expression, and your words, "Oh, I'm upset ... I need to be by myself for a few minutes," are consistent. This consistency between your words and your behavior are what allows trust to grow.

TEACHING HONESTY

Many parents demand 100% honesty from their children. This is a tricky proposition when we do not demand it of ourselves. In fact, I doubt that it is possible to be 100% honest. More often than not, honesty is a gray area. If we say, "In a minute ..." we know that we are generalizing. We do not really mean sixty seconds. For many children, at their discretion, one minute means just that, sixty seconds. "But mom, you said, 'in a minute' ... it's been three minutes!" This whiny child's statement is true, but is it really true? What we are talking about here is the spirit of the law of honesty not the letter of the law of honesty.

An important part of building trust is picking your words correctly. I find myself saying, "If all goes well ..." a lot when talking to children (and most adults). "If all goes well, I will be at your school at 3:00." "If all goes well, we can go shoe shopping Saturday afternoon." This teaches people that I am basically an honest person. This keeps me away from the "YOU SAID!" indignation of the mortally wounded child.

However, on a very subtle note, I do listen carefully for the honesty of life. For example, if I am walking by the bathroom and notice that a damp towel is left on the floor I tend to get involved. "Whose towel?" I call down the hall. "Mine dad, I'll take care of it in a minute," an innocent voice responds. I'm not concerned about the "minute" word, I am concerned about my child's intent to be honest. So, an hour later when I see the towel still drying on the

floor my focus changes.

“Ethan (the former innocent) you led me to believe that you were going to take care of the towel”

“Yeah!” He mumbles. “I was, I’m going right now.”

“After you pick up the towel, come and find me, we have to talk about being honest.”

“I was honest, I’m getting the towel right now!”

Calmly I explain, “This isn’t about the towel, this is about your word. I’m not worried about the towel, I’m worried about your word.”

In a few minutes I will, again, explain that I put a lot of faith in his words. That when I get my hug and kiss good night, I really mean the words, “I love you.” When I hear the words, “I love you,” I want to believe them. If a person is willing to deceive me about a nothing towel on the bathroom floor, how can I be sure about really important words such as, “I love you?”

Please note, the towel is an inconvenience. Honesty is a necessity to help your child feel loved and protected.

As parents we need to watch our words carefully. We need to be careful not to teach dishonest behavior. For example, recently a family got into a heated discussion about answering the phone. The voices got loud. It was clear that the issue was not the phone, but rather trust and honesty issues around the phone. In this particular situation, mom had a sister that she didn’t care for. So, she refused to answer the phone in case her sister called. When the sister did call, the children were instructed to tell her, “Oh, mom is out ...” or “Mom is in the bath.” Mom was surprised, when I pointed out, that she was teaching her children to lie.

Relationships are built on small moments, if these moments are dishonest, the relationship cannot be stable.

A HEALTHY FOCUS ON YOUR CHILD AS A MEMBER OF YOUR FAMILY

As a therapist I am usually called when the family is in conflict. I tend to hear similar stories about how Johnny doesn’t listen, or that, “Nothing has worked.” It is common for a parent to spend fifteen minutes telling me about the negative behaviors that Johnny has shown. When I ask, “Tell me something positive about your son.” Mom or dad are usually taken back. “Well, ah ... Johnny is a good boy ... (pause) He is really good at ...” At this point I can see the tension drain from the parents’ faces. For some time now, they have been fearful for their son. The circumstances being what they are, all they can see are Johnny’s negative behaviors.

To feel loved a child needs to be seen. Too often parents only look at their child’s negative behaviors. For whatever reason they stop seeing their child and start looking at just their child’s behaviors. This is a major shift in parenting. If you focus on the negative,

It takes great wisdom to realize that all feelings are legitimate: the positive, the negative, and the ambivalent.

Haim Ginott, Ph.D.

Character is what you are in the dark.

Dwight Moody

Labels are for cans of soup, and your child doesn't deserve to be put on a shelf.

Character is not made in a crisis—it is only exhibited.

Robert Freema

A man never discloses his own character so clearly as when he describes another's.

Jean Paul Richter

your child will have to perform more negatively to feed his need for attention. Your child needs, at the core of his being, your attention. So, won't he have to act out just to get your attention?

After explaining the above, one father growled back. "Ahhh, that's just psycho-babble wishy-wash. My kid should just fly right. He knows we love him, he is just choosing to be a royal pain in the @\$!" Over the next few weeks this caring father learned that he was correct. His child was "choosing" to act out. He also found that he was teaching his son to act out. With a few minor parenting changes, this family started to enjoy being together again.

In the next section we will look at the attitude of parenting. Things we can do to help our children grow up to be loving, caring, respectful and happy individuals.

The following section on advocating versus judging is often praised by parents as the "most helpful" parental insight of the ones discussed in this course. On a personal note, I believe that when I truly incorporated the following into my therapy I became a substantially better therapist. I was fortunate to have supervisors early in my training that taught by advocating for my personal and professional growth.

ADVOCATING VERSES JUDGING YOUR CHILD

The quickest way to destroy a relationship is to judge another's behavior as a character flaw.

Mr. Holms was ailing and close to death. He contacted me and asked for an appointment for himself and his younger brother. There was only one catch. Mr. Holms had not talked with his younger brother for over forty years. Mr. Holms, now seventy-two, was fearful that he would die without making things right. Mr. Holms, Sam, wanted to say good-bye to his seventy year old brother, Elliot. They had lived within 100 miles of each other all this time. Except for the occasional wedding or funeral, they avoided each other. The brothers' wives organized the meeting.

I opened the session by thanking the two men for agreeing to meet. Both men were nervous. After a pause, Elliot said, "Well, I hear you wanted to see me before you pass away." Five minutes later the conversation got around to how this long silence got started.

"It was a nothing, I told him he was a bum for losing his job." Sam confessed. "I didn't mean anything by it, but he punched me in the mouth."

"I sure did, I socked him one good. He said I was not going to be able to take care of my family. I showed him. I always had a

bigger house. I always had a fancier car.”

Sam protested. “I never said that you were not going to take care of your family.”

“You did too, you lying *^\$&%^\$. You said I was a bum and that you would have to give me money.” Elliot turned and looked at me, tears welled in his eyes. “I never took a penny from him, Doctor.” He clenched his fist. “I never needed him.”

Wow! What a session. The men left together and went with their wives for coffee. (Two years later, as of this writing, they are both going strong. In fact, their wives informed me that they both cheat on their golf scores.) Forty years of silence because one brother felt his character was being attacked by another. Wow!

Our character is the combination of qualities that makes us who we are. It tends to be our moral or ethical strength or lack there of.

Often, without thinking, parents change a problem behavior into a personal character attack. Mrs. Patton was very upset that her daughter, Jenni was caught at school with different clothes on than she left home in. As it turned out, Jenni was keeping a “cool” set of clothes in the woods by her home. On the way to school she was pulling a “super girl” changing act and attending school in rather revealing garb. Mom found out when a teacher called home concerned about a “...less than modest top that was distracting male students in fourth period English.” Mrs. Patton had a cow! A week later, in my office, she repeated, “I told her that no daughter of mine was going to be a whore. I was furious ... I screamed at her that she was going to end up no good and whoring herself just to pay for her drugs!”

Let’s look at this conflict. Jenni was not accused of prostitution or drug abuse. Mrs. Patton, in a calm moment, was able to say that she didn’t think that Jenni was either. But in the heat of conflict, mom’s worst fears came out — hard. Mom’s character attack was so strong that Jenni ran away from home and hid in the basement of the family’s church for three days. (It all worked out well in a few months.)

What was the issue? Remember, Jenni was inappropriately dressed for school according to the school and mom. Jenni, on the other hand, thought that she looked great, like some girl on the TV show 90210. It took three weeks to get to the issue of Jenni’s school clothing. It took another week to get to Jenni’s lying, with her behavior, by changing clothes on the way to school. A character attack kept this family in crisis for a month.

It is usually the little, hard to notice, character attacks that erode a person’s self esteem. Your children listen carefully to your words. Even to the hidden meanings between your words. (I know it doesn’t feel like it, but it is true. Words like “bedtime”, or “homework” are regularly tuned out. But what you think and feel are heard and made

Common sense is instinct, and enough of it is genius.

Josh Billings

Of all the properties which belong to honorable men, not one is so highly prized as that of character.

Henry Clay

part of your child's core makeup.)

Let's revisit the negative sounding list of examples from earlier. This list is full of clear cut character attacks.

THE NEGATIVE SOUNDING LIST: REVISITED

You're stupid
You're clumsy
You're selfish
You act so naughty
You're bad
You're ugly
You're fat
You're evil
You act so silly
Can't you make real friends
You're so disrespectful
You always wake up in a really bad mood
You're just like... (disliked relative)
You're driving me crazy
Are you trying to make me flip out the rest of the way?
If your head wasn't attached you'd lose it

Not one of these statements can truly define a child's character. But, with repetition, the child will believe that it does. For example: Kyle was a shy twelve year old. He was referred to my clinic because he was molested by an uncle. When I met him in the waiting room the conversation went like this:

Dr. Phil: Welcome to the neighborhood, you must be Kyle.

Kyle: (Looking at his feet) I guess.

Dr. Phil: How about we get together and talk?

Kyle: (Looking at his feet) Why?

Dr. Phil: Your mom told me I had to.

Kyle: (Looking at his feet) Did she tell you that you are stupid?

Dr. Phil: Not yet.

Kyle: (Looking at his feet) I don't want to (big sigh)

Dr. Phil: I didn't know about that, but I have to ... I feel stupid just standing here in the door.

Kyle: You're not stupid, you're a grown-up. (Looking at me for the first time)

Kyle and I became friends in no time. He taught me that he really believed he was stupid. He was sure that he messed up everything and was too stupid to see how. He believed his uncle molested him because he deserved to be humiliated. He also taught me that everyone in his family called everyone else in the world stupid when they were upset for any reason. (After a year of family therapy Kyle was proud to be himself.)

LABELING IS DISABLING

Dr. Haim Ginott makes it clear with his saying, "labeling is disabling" that placing a character label on a child's behavior lowers that child's self esteem. What this means for parents is that we must be very careful when judging our children. Let me be very clear, I am not saying that we do not judge, I am saying that we must focus on judging behavior not character. Children need limits set for them. This helps a child to learn what is expected of them. We show our love by setting limits and following our own structure.

Most parents get into trouble when they confuse setting limits (judging behavior) with judging character. For example, Kyle was told he was stupid for any mistake he committed. No matter the size or the degree of inconvenience. Dropping a fork or missing one math equation was proof to his family, and eventually himself, that he was stupid. In fact, if he was really a slow learner, his parents would have protected him from being called stupid. It would have been seen as cruel. Kyle incorporated the word stupid into his definition of "self." When anything went wrong he just consoled himself with his belief, "I'm stupid so it must be normal for me to do stupid things." With this attitude Kyle became self defeating. How could he learn from his mistakes if he was, due to a character flaw, stupid and unable to learn?

When a child is not labeled, she will tend to explore ways to solve problems. This exploration builds self esteem.

Children seem to be able to get into trouble naturally. By helping children figure out ways to deal with conflict we assist them in learning how to work their way out of trouble. We serve our children best by teaching them problem solving skills. With problem solving skills your child is being prepared to enter the world with high self esteem.

My family was once invited to Christmas Eve dinner at a friend's home. The home was warm and welcoming. At the kids' table, their

When we disclaim praise, it is only showing our desire to be praised a second time.

François de La Rochefoucauld

five year old child did what young children do well, she spilled her milk. Her father slammed his hands on the table and thundered ... “Clean that up, you’re so clumsy!” His five year old looked shocked. She froze with eyes wide. Her mother came over, “It’s okay honey, I’ll clean it up.”

In a few minutes calm settled over the table. The children’s voices were back to spirited tones. Then, the real world crept in. My son, also five, did what five year olds do. He spilled. He didn’t just spill a little, he really spilled. His glass slipped from his fingers, hit the table on an angle and hosed down three children across from him. The world stopped spinning. Everyone looked at me. The children held their breaths. “Josh, what are you going to do?” I asked calmly. “I’m going to get a sponge and clean up my mess.” He announced with a smile. (Smarty pants older brother added in the background, “And give Rickey a bath.”)

A few hours later, out on the back porch, my host asked how I stayed so calm. He was very apologetic for yelling at his daughter with so many people around. I explained that I wasn’t calm. Inside my thoughts were racing to an explosion. I was furious that Josh spilled the milk at someone else’s home. I also knew the big picture. I expect my children to get into and out of trouble all by themselves. I pointed out, gently, that he judged his daughter by saying, “Clean that up, you’re so clumsy!” That for him, the spilled milk became a character issue (proof of clumsiness, incompetence). I, on the other hand, advocated for my son, “Josh, what are you going to do?” I assumed that he understood the problem and that he would have to, with my support, solve it. (I also joked that his daughter was not a very good spiller and that my son was able to stain three new Christmas outfits.)

By advocating for our children we let them grow and learn. This is a process. I remember, in the privacy of our home, when Josh wanted to leave spilled milk for the cat or use the vacuum cleaner to suck it up. In those cases we looked at the options and discussed the outcomes. In time we got to the sponge idea. Raising children spills a lot of milk.

When we advocate for our child we are future oriented. We are developing in our offspring life skills such as:

- Problem solving
- Cooperative behavior
- Creativity
- Brainstorming
- Responsibility
- Caring
- Job completion
- Communication

Isn't this the stuff we all put on our wish list of things we wish to give to our children?

When we judge we put our children on the defensive. We focus on the character of our child not on the solution to the perceived problem.

When we judge we give the solution. When we advocate for our child he creates the solution to his problem. We support by gently guiding his solution.

When we judge we tell our child what to think. When we advocate our children learn how to think.

This is a major difference. I want your child to think as a caring individual. At age thirteen when your child is very upset with you for whatever reason, I want him to be involved with his solution solving process. Let's look at two scenarios.

THE JUDGED CHILD

Cliff has a heated argument with his mother. On his way to school he is fuming. He runs into Tim. Tim is sympathetic to Cliff's plight. He explains that he has a little pill that makes him feel better when his life becomes unbearable. Cliff shows some interest in solving his problems with drugs. Tim offers to introduce him to his supplier.

THE ADVOCATED CHILD

Dan has a heated argument with his mother. On his way to school he is fuming. He runs into Tara. Tara is sympathetic to Dan's plight. She explains that she has a little pill that makes her feel better when her life becomes unbearable.

Dan: You take a pill to feel better?

Tara: Not every day, just when I need it.

Dan: I ain't that upset. It is just an argument. I'll figure out a way to solve it, I just need time.

Tara: Why bother, in ten minutes you'll have no problems.

Dan: I can handle my problems. How can you put that stuff into you, don't you worry about your health?

Tara: Naw. I just don't think about it.

Dan: I would if I was you ...

Tara: Don't be a jerk ...

Eating words has never
given me indigestion.
Winston Churchill

The big difference is that Dan has a history of solving problems. He knows that he has the skill and plans on using it. Tara, Tim and Cliff are judging themselves as incapable of dealing with their world.

Praise is often misunderstood by parents and therapists alike. Many therapists and teachers quickly state, "You can't over do praise." In the next section you will see how praise is a powerful tool and not one to be waved around lightly.

THE POWER OF PRAISE

*Praise is a powerful two edged sword.
One edge builds self esteem slowly,
the other destroys it quickly.*

Suit the action to the word,
the word to the action.
W. Shakespeare

Most people see praise as one hundred percent positive. "If I praise my child he will grow up feeling good about himself." On the surface this makes sense. But in the real world praise is not as easy to use. For an example let's go to Thanksgiving dinner at the Hamilton's home.

Mary Anne Hamilton is a happy go lucky fourteen year old. She is usually easy to live with. Her family works together quite well. On this festive occasion, with the family all around, Mrs. Hamilton praises Mary Anne for her help in getting the dinner prepared.

Mom: Mary Anne was so helpful, I just don't know what I would have done without her. I bless my lucky stars that I have such a wonderful daughter. You know honey, you are such an angel.

Mary Anne: Moooom, stop!

Mom: No, it's true. You are the joy of my life.

At this point, mild mannered Mary Anne exploded. She pushed by her mother knocking the mashed potatoes out of her hands. When Mrs. Hamilton consulted with me she was very concerned. "My Mary Anne never would act like that. She is an angel. Do you

think it could be (whisper) drugs? I can't believe my baby would use drugs."

When I met with Mary Anne it was apparent that overall she was doing wonderfully. But, the pressure had just become too great.

Mary Anne: You wouldn't understand. My mom is just a, you know— a perfect person. She is always happy. She is soooo loving, all the time...

Dr. Phil: And the point is?

Mary Anne: I just lost it. All those people and she was calling me her "angel". You know, as if I was perfect or something.

Dr. Phil: Being perfect is a bad thing?

Mary Anne: Well, yeah ... No. (pause) I was having, you know, thoughts.

Dr. Phil: I'll know when you tell me ...

Mary Anne: I was thinking of (whisper) boys.

Dr. Phil: So?

Mary Anne: (Blurting it out) All morning I was thinking of boys. All I could think about was boys. Then my mom, in front of everyone called me "her angel." If she really knew me she would hate me ... she would think of me as a slut.

Praise is a two sided sword. If praise is focused on character it tends to be dangerous. Mary Anne is a caring and wonderful person, but she is mainly a person, with all the positives and negatives that go with person-hood. The well intentioned praise of her mother was perceived by Mary Anne as painful.

If we praise character we are labeling our child. If we label we disable the creativity of our children.

I was invited to a preschool to talk with the teaching staff about ways to deal with aggressive behaviors with three to five year olds. While I was waiting for all the teachers to arrive, a little tot bounced over and asked me if I liked her watercolor finger painting.

Dr. Phil: Well, let's take a look at this. I see red, green and a little blue.

Tot: I did it with my fingers.

Dr. Phil: I enjoyed looking at it. Thanks.

A few seconds later a little boy came over to the teacher standing next to me and showed off his finger painting.

Teacher: Boy is that great ... You are so good at this.

Little boy: I did it myself!

Teacher: You're the best little artist ...

At this point the little boy got upset. He walked back to his area and sat down with a huff.

"You see," said the teacher. "I have a class of little angry kids."

The teaching staff and I spent the meeting discussing the role of praise in the classroom. When the teacher told the little boy that he was "the best little artist" I can only imagine his internal dialog.

There's an old joke that goes like this: "What did the kindergartner say when asked his name?"
"Billy, no"

"I'm not the best, Sammy is the best..."

"This teacher is teasing me because I don't paint as well as Timmy."

"What a dumb teacher, she thinks this is good, I did good yesterday, this is just okay."

The teacher, meaning to be supportive, made the painting a character issue by calling it great and labeling the child as "the best little artist."

I don't know for sure, but the little boy's behavior showed that the praise he got was not a positive.

The little girl that I met painted me a picture and gave it to the classroom grandmother to give to me. What I did was simply define what I saw and gave my opinion on how it effected me.

"I see red, green and a little blue."

"I enjoyed looking at it."

By defining what we see the child knows we are interested in them. They feel the implicit difference between being seen and being looked at. By defining your observation, your child feels your involvement without feeling that you are telling them what to think. Even in the adult world it is hard to receive praise. Many adults have a difficult time hearing praise about themselves. Many will feel obligated to disagree with the praise or immediately return a

compliment. On lists of psychologically stressful situations you will find categories like, “received an award ” or “earned a promotion at work.” It is difficult for children to be showered with praise. Having to live up to the praise of another is virtually impossible. The more valued the praise giver the harder the praise is to accept.

Let’s take a look at the positive sounding list from earlier..

THE POSITIVE SOUNDING LIST: REVISITED

You’re so good
You’re so beautiful
You’re so smart
You can do it if you try hard enough
You’re so creative
You could do anything you put your mind to
You can be anything you want to be
I didn’t have the breaks you will have
You’re an angel
You’re a gift from God
You’ve got such a pretty face
You’re so kind to others

On the surface the above list looks very positive. However, in the real world, these positive sounding pats on the back erode self esteem. They are all labels. Each tells the child about what you believe to be their character. Everyone of the praises in this list were given to me by children who found these positive sounding words to be a negative, painfully negative.

Connie (age 17) put it simply, “From about 13 until I left home, every time my mom uttered the words, ‘You’re a gift from God’ I wanted to kill myself. How dare she tell me that God cared for me. If God cared for me my dad wouldn’t have died.”

I am sure that Connie’s mother had only the best intentions. Unwittingly, she was hurting her daughter when she thought she was helping. I asked Connie what words her mother could have spoken that would fit her mom’s needs while still feeling helpful to her. Connie thought for almost fifteen minutes, “I feel better knowing God loves me.” She explained, “That way I could see that God was helpful to my mom and not feel that God hated me.” What Connie stumbled upon was defining versus labeling. By defining we share what we know, by labeling we tell the other person what we think. Or, what we think they should think.

Let’s take the positive sounding list and fix it so it actually is a positive list. We want the same feelings to be shared but we want the outcome to be self esteem building.

You must look into
people, as well as at them.
Lord Chesterfield

▼ = Positive Sounding List

▲ = Positive List

- ▼ You're so good
 - ▲ I liked the way you acted today
 - ▲ The way you treated Tommy seemed caring
- ▼ You're so beautiful
 - ▲ I enjoy looking at you smile
 - ▲ Being with you makes me feel good
- ▼ You're so smart
 - ▲ I'm impressed with how well you understood that chapter
 - ▲ You did that math homework in no time
- ▼ You can do it if you try hard enough
 - ▲ I'm concerned that you aren't trying your hardest
 - ▲ What plan do you have to finish your homework
- ▼ You're so creative
 - ▲ Wow! Where did you get that idea from
 - ▲ Did you feel creative when you solved that problem
- ▼ You could do anything you put your mind to
 - ▲ It doesn't seem to me that you want to...
 - ▲ How would you like to see it get done
- ▼ You can be anything you want to be
 - ▲ I find myself wondering what you will be doing in...
 - ▲ When you let yourself dream what do you dream about?
- ▼ I didn't have the breaks you will have
 - ▲ I worry that you are not taking advantage...
 - ▲ I'm happy that you have choices in your life
- ▼ You're an angel
 - ▲ I enjoy spending time with you
 - ▲ Spending time with you helps me feel special
- ▼ You're a gift from God
 - ▲ I am thankful that I know you
 - ▲ I thank God that I know you
- ▼ You've got such a pretty face (concern over weight gain)
 - ▲ I'm worried that you have gained weight
 - ▲ I didn't buy any cookies this week
- ▼ You're so kind to others
 - ▲ Your friendship is very important to me
 - ▲ When I see you acting kindly, I feel proud to be your mom

As you can see from the above, the word "I" is very important. You are sharing a part of yourself without telling your child how to think. Because your child cares for you, what you think is very important to him. He is constantly comparing himself to what he thinks you want him to be. By sharing your thoughts in a "positive" esteem building manner, both you and your child benefit. Your child feels your love and you know your love is felt. Life can be truly wonderful.

HOMework REVISITED

At this point I suggest you take a few minutes to revisit the homework from Chapter One. I advise you to look at the words from your past. Evaluate the innuendo and subtleties of control. Look for the verbal pokes and prods. By looking at the nesting material you used to build your own self esteem, you may find insight into the building materials you make available for your children to use in the formation of their self esteem.

Please, do not overdo this look backwards. Keep perspective on the enormity of words that make up your life. I advise you to observe trends rather than placing blame. Look for what you can learn. Keep guilt at bay. Simply put, look back so you will not repeat what you believe should not be repeated. Go easy on yourself and your family. Advocate for your parents, too.

TEACHING RESPECT

The title of this section is somewhat misleading. We do not truly teach respect. We actually earn it. I am contacted regularly by parents who say, "My kids do not respect me!" My first question tends to be, "Do you respect them?" This is a difficult question. Mrs. Elmira put it bluntly, "I expect respect, I put food on the table ... I am the mother. I expect to be respected."

Behavior counts. In fact, behavior counts more than words. Your children watch you closely. They pick up most of their social cues from you (until high school). One parent told me the following story:

I walked into the living room. My three girls were playing with their dolls. I paused at the door and watched. My eleven year old was running the play household. Every few seconds she had the mommy doll complain and hit the other dolls. Not hard hits, just constant hits. She kept saying, "Let's go honey, mommy is in a hurry." Or, "Hurry, you're making mommy late!" The part that hurt the most was that my daughter was using my words with a tone of hate. She sounded so put out by the children dolls.

I asked the children over dinner about the game, and my eleven year old said, with an innocent smile, "I got to be you, I bossed everyone around and clobbered them for not listening."

This parent was astonished to discover how she sounded through the ears of her children. She never thought that she "clobbered" her children. What she learned was that her children did not



Quick Reference Guide

Temperament: The characteristic way of thinking, behaving, or reacting of a specific person.

feel respected by her. What she thought was prodding, the tapping, motivating pushing behavior of her own childhood, was a regular example of disrespect.

We, as parents, need to model respectful behavior. This is easier said than done. Our children are around us 24 hours a day. Fortunately for us, teaching respectful behavior is a slow process. It only takes a few long years for a child to learn to read, but it takes many more for a child to internalize self respect and exhibit it outwardly.

We teach respect by using “please,” “thank you,” “I don’t know,” and “I’m sorry” on a regular basis. We exhibit respect by not shrieking or over powering our children with words. We share the love of respect by talking at eye level to a young child. We respect by directing children *to do* versus *not do*. A child feels respected when a parent directs him away from misbehavior versus telling him to stop doing the misbehavior.

Which sounds more respectful to you?

“Billy, stop bothering the cat!” or “Billy, will you help me in the kitchen?”

“Sally, I told you not to tease your sister!” or “Sally, please let the dog out.”

“What are you up to, put that hammer back!” or “What do you need a hammer for?”

Children will “test” behaviors out on their parents that they see others doing. Mrs. Story was upset,

Carl (age 14) walked into the house and plopped himself on the sofa putting his shoes on the coffee table. I was shocked. “What are you doing young man?” I asked him. He told me to, “@\$\$%^ off.” I couldn’t believe he would talk to me like that. My husband and I don’t use such language.

Carl was practicing what he saw at his new friend’s home. To Carl’s surprise, his parents’ reaction was not the same as his friend’s parents. Carl was trying out behaviors “modeled” in another’s home. This is normal. Children will try behaviors seen elsewhere. Even two dimensional TV and movies are influential in your child’s life.

We need to use clear messages when a new behavior is not acceptable. When there is no character assassination, kids tend to make quality choices. For example, a few years ago a movie showed the tough gang bangers sucking on baby pacifiers and reprimand-

It is our hypothesis that differences in temperament in the newborn and the very young are biologically determined, but then the infant’s temperament is influenced by her interactions with her parents, which may either intensify or modify her original temperament. And as the child grows older, other environmental factors may accentuate, modify, or even change one or another temperamental attributes.

Stella Chase, M.D.

Alexander Thomas, M.D.

ing their parents. Lots of kids in my area started carrying pacifiers around. The fad lasted a few weeks then ran its course. (I guess the idea sucked.) Many parents had to learn how to *support* their children during this fad.

Judging: What are you, a baby?

Advocating: You can suck on a pacifier if you need to, but I'm not comfortable with you sucking it around me. Please put it in your pocket.

Judging: If you talk to me like that again I'll wash your mouth out with soap!

Advocating: I do not allow such language from my children. Please respect my wishes.

Teaching respect is a long process. Mrs. Columbia called to thank me about a family session almost two weeks prior.

Dr. Phil, I just want to let you know that Bethany is trying. She asked me if I had time to fix her jeans. She was polite. She said, "Mamma, would you be able to fix my jeans? I would appreciate your help." This is nice, she usually says, "Fix this, I need them after school."

As parents we need to demand respect while we show respect. This way we can teach our children that some behaviors are acceptable while others are not. This is not only in our home. I have received appropriate respect from rude acting children and adults alike by firmly stating, "I do not allow people to talk to me like that. How can I help you?" This firm but respectful statement has avoided many uncomfortable situations.

LOOKING FOR THE POSITIVE

Most parents are much too hard on themselves. They expect perfection out of themselves and their family. This expectation is very hard to live with, as well as unrealistic. As a society we honor a baseball player who bats 300. We do not notice that seven out of ten times that same baseball player failed. With a batting average of 300, the hero baseball player only did his job, getting on base, three out of every ten times.

If a football quarterback was able to throw 14 of 20 passes for completion it would be a great accomplishment. A consistent 14 of 20 passer is a multimillionaire. But, in the real world, 14 of 20 is only 70%. If you only picked up your child from school 70% of the

Every piece of marble has a statue in it waiting to be released by someone of sufficient skills to chip away the unnecessary parts. Just as the sculpture is to marble, so is education to the soul. It releases it. For only the educated are free. You cannot create a statue by smashing the marble with a hammer, and you cannot by force of arms release the spirit of the soul.

Confucius

time your child would be living in a foster home.

I hear daily from well meaning parents that they are not living up to their own and society's expectations of parenting. This is usually much worse for moms than dads. During a father/son lunch at a family restaurant, we boys were having a great time making a mess and laughing it up. (This is normal behavior, even when mom is around.) A kindly older woman interrupted our mayhem and said, "It's so nice to see a father baby-sitting." What?! Baby-sitting? I didn't say anything at the time but, I was a little offended. I do not think of myself as a *baby-sitter*. I was simply *parenting*. All too often our society allows fathers to "baby-sit." I have had well meaning fathers sit in my office and complain that on their day off they have to baby-sit. How unfortunate for the family when a father disregards his importance as a parent to his children.

One mom told me that she was upset that she didn't spend more time with her preschooler. Between work and momming she had no time for anything else, but she was telling me the truth when she shared her feelings.

We have to be more reasonable with ourselves. Parents need to have adult lives also. If you are a mom or a dad all the time you will go bonkers. Parents need adult time. This need must be respected. I advocate for all the parents I work with go on dates. That's right, dates. Parents set up a little time every week and have adult time. This is very difficult to do but important for the sanity of the individuals and the emotional health of the family.

In the real world we need to focus on the "squeaky wheel." The problems tend to be louder than the positives. Usually we have no choice but to focus on the negatives. If there is a criminal stalking my community I need to know about it. If there is danger I need to protect my family. But, in the home we need to nurture a tiny world of safety. A tiny world of loving interactions. I know for myself that on some days the only sunny spot on my planet is my little world called home. I want the same sunny spot for my children too.

As parents we need to focus on the positives whenever possible. If Jimmy has spilt milk eleven meals in a row, let him spill grape juice so that the stains are more interesting. Use humor to help you wade through the swampy parts of life. Notice the little positives and define them. "Tommy, your homework looks interesting tonight; is it?" Let's not focus on the homework, let's focus on Tommy's feelings and thoughts about his homework.

As discussed earlier, "relationships are built on small moments." We need to seek out these small moments and cherish them.

YOUR CHILD'S TEMPERAMENT

Mrs. Darting was in tears when I first met her. She sat down on the couch. I asked her why she made the appointment (she re-

It is not what they profess
but what they practice that
makes them good.

Greek proverb

fused to tell anyone when she made the appointment). Then it happened, more tears. I handed her some tissues and asked if I could help.

Mrs. Darting: I hope so. I just don't know what to do. My son is slow.

Dr. Phil: How did you come to that conclusion?

Mrs. Darting: His teacher said he was "slow." She said he was "slow in math and reading." My baby is slow ... how will he ever take care of himself? What am I to do? Will he ever make something of himself?

As it turned out Mrs. Darting's son, Kyle, was slow. In fact he read very slowly. He computed his math very slowly. Everyone that knows Kyle knows he is slow. He does his chores slowly. He speaks very carefully and slowly. He also is intelligent, caring, and sensitive. He is an easy child to like. He is an easy child to teach. He is a loving child. But, boy is he slow. Kyle's temperament is easy going. He seldom gets upset and when he does it is hard to tell.

When Mrs. Darting heard from Kyle's teacher that Kyle was "slow" she got herself all worked up. She thought that Kyle's teacher was telling her that Kyle was retarded. "All I could think of was how bad a mother I was," she explained, "For all these years I knew Kyle was physically slow but I didn't know he was unable to learn. I kept kicking myself for not helping him more." Kyle was not retarded. He had an easy going temperament.

In the early part of the 1900s it was popular to believe that children were born as a "blank slate." It was touted that the newborn was born to be molded and taught by its mother. This led to the mid 1900s when all negative behaviors in a child were the result of the mother consciously or unconsciously writing the wrong stuff on her child's "slate." It was popular at that time for behavioral psychologists to state, "Give me a baby at birth and I will mold it into a scientist, a teacher, or whatever you want." Other psychotherapists developed grandiose theories of "id" and "ego" interactions. It was postulated that all behavior was an intricate interaction of conscious and unconscious processes. All this is well and good, but very confusing for most parents.

Research in the 1980s and 90s has shown us that newborns are born as individuals. They each have a "pre-wired" personality. They are, in short, individuals. This "pre-wire" is their temperament. As parents, we can influence our children's temperament but we cannot change it. Also, as we influence our children, our children influence us. Parenting is a two way street. Your temperament is influenced by your child. (As our children get older others will influence our children.)

What is most important about all this psycho-babble theory are your *expectations*. For example, let me tell you about the Sandel family. Mrs. Sandel has three children. She is a single mom. She came to my office concerned that her daughter, Robin (age 14), was having a problem getting out of bed on school mornings.

Mrs. Sandel: Every morning the same old thing. Robin is impossible to wake up. I shake her, I scream at her, I've even thrown cold water on her. It is a huge battle every morning. I just can't take it any more.

Dr. Phil: How do the boys do in the morning?

Mrs. Sandel: It's like night and day. The boys hop out of bed with a smile and start

running. We joke about how I have two hares and one tortoise. Robin just doesn't move. She is a real couch potato.

Dr. Phil: Robin, what do you think is going on?

Robin: Not much, I'm just sleepy in the mornings. No matter how much sleep I get, I'm sleepy until noon.

In this family, the two boys and the mom got tired at about 8 PM. It was rare that they could stay up past nine without passing out. Robin, on the other hand, started her day slowly but when the rest of the family was ready for bed she was revving up for her evening. She watched TV and talked on the phone until 2 AM most nights. If she was allowed to she would sleep until noon.

Mrs. Sandel told me about how hard Robin was as an infant. That she seemed to never sleep. She was quiet and calm but always awake. Both of her boys, she joked, "You could set a clock by them. As babies they went to sleep at six, had a meal and diaper change at two and then slept again soundly until six in the morning. Not Robin. She never slept and only snacked. Twenty times a day for over two years. I was exhausted." Mrs. Sandel had described her children's temperament. Her children did not learn their sleep patterns. Robin's temperament was that of an owl, her brothers' temperaments were more like roosters. At this point, the discussion was focusing on *expectations*. Mrs. Sandel was very frustrated when she came to my office. She was concerned that she was a bad mother and that her daughter would never amount to much. "How could she keep a job if she was late every morning?" she once told me.

What Mrs. Sandel needed to learn was that Robin's temperament was not a problem. It was a fact. It was Robin. And Robin had better learn how to fit into the world. Notice the focus. Robin had a problem. She had to get along in a world that doesn't care if you are tired. Robin had to figure out a way to get her temperament to work for her, not against her. (And she did. What a great kid!) When I first met Mrs. Sandel she had a problem. Soon there after, she learned that Robin had a problem. And, that only Robin could solve this problem. This change in view helped Mrs. Sandel gain her life back. She went back to being "loving mom" and stopped being "nagging alarm clock." She was there to support her daughter, but she was not there to solve her daughter's problems. That was impossible. Her goal was to advocate for her daughter's needs and to support and guide her daughter. Wow! She got to be mom. The role she wanted in the first place.

As parents we have an enormous amount of influence when it comes to our children. But, we can't change our child's basic temperament. If our child is a square wooden block in a family of round rubber wheels we can't magically change wood to rubber. But with time, love and organized caring we can help our child roll through life. At first every roll of a wooden block is thump, thump, thump. Then slowly, over time, the sharp corners get rubbed away until the block is mostly round and rolling through life quite well. One of our jobs as a parent is to help sand the rough edges off our children, helping them to roll through life easier.

By keeping in mind that our children have individuality, their own temperament and personality, we help ourselves deal with the frustration of bumping into the rough wooden edges while they get sanded down.

In the following section I point out my pet peeve. I soften the harshness a little by prepar-

ing the story by sharing my “internal dialog” concerning my pet peeve. This allows the listener to hear the story without them thinking that the story teller dislikes them personally.

CARETAKER VERSUS CAREGIVER

I confess, I have a pet peeve. A little something that really bothers me. In fact, it bothers me more than it probably should. Which, I guess is the definition of a pet peeve. My pet peeve is parents who are caretakers versus caregivers. Please allow me to vent. A caretaker is a person who makes sure that their charge is taken care of. Their charge is well fed and protected. But the relationship tends to be superficial. A caregiver is a person who sees the whole child. The caregiver makes sure that the child’s needs are met but, that is only the beginning. The caregiver opens themselves to a true emotional relationship with the child, the ups and the downs. The caregiver takes the chance to feel the whole spectrum of emotions. The joy and the sorrow. The caregiver puts their needs on hold for a moment and focuses on the other. For the time they are together, the child knows, at their core, that they are very important to the caregiver. They know that they, as an individual, count.

Don’t confuse caregiver with *giving*. A caregiver is not all giving. This is not the materialistic form of giving. It is an emotional form of giving. Caregivers keep the big picture in mind. The word “no” is very easy for them to say. The caregiver focuses on the child’s needs, what is best for the child.

I once was fortunate to observe a very minor interaction that illustrates care giving quite well. When my oldest son, Ethan, was in second grade we went to visit his mother at school where she was a new second grade teacher. While we were helping decorate mom’s new classroom another second grade teacher popped in to say hi. Mrs. McCarthy was a 49 year veteran of the elementary school. That’s right, she had taught school since the invention of the printing press.

A few minutes later Mrs. McCarthy asked Ethan if he would help her carry some paper. As they walked out of the room Mrs. McCarthy said softly to Ethan, “Teach me your name.” This request caught my attention. This veteran teacher was asking this little boy to *teach* her.

Later, as we were driving home, I asked Ethan what he thought about mom’s new classroom. He said, “It’s OK, Mrs. McCarthy thinks I’m great!” “How do you know?” I inquired. “I just do,” he continued, “She likes me.”

In just a few moments, Mrs. McCarthy was able to impart to Ethan that he was important, that he was lovable. This is care giving. Letting your children know, at the core of their being, that they are lovable and special to you is the cornerstone of their self esteem.

POSTTEST

When you’re ready, take the posttest to obtain your CEU certificate. Your test consists of 5 multiple choice or true/false questions per Continuing Education Unit (3 CEU = 15 questions).

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Take Test



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