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BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

HOW SELF-ESTEEM IS DEVELOPED

A baby with poor self-esteem? That is a nonsensical statement. Babies just "are." Initially, without a sense of self, self-esteem is not a part of the babies' experience.



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Within a very short time, however, self-esteem (potentially) begins to develop. How does that happen? It happens- it develops from the simplest of caregiving interactions.

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

SELF-ESTEEM AT ITS HEIGHT

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

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

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

SELF-ESTEEM BECOMES FADES and BECOMES VULNERABLE

Children develop their sense of self-esteem through your attention to their basic need. This gives them over and over, the feedback that they have worth to you. From these experiences, they realize that since they have worth to you, they must be truly worthy themselves. This is a powerful dynamic. However, it is also a fragile dynamic. While children can learn to love themselves, they also may learn that they are "bad" from the



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same experiences. Sometimes parents ask, "My child used to be so wonderful -- he/she used to love himself/herself so much. But now, it seems that his/her Self-Esteem has gotten lower." What has happened to his/her Self-Esteem?

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

FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE- SOCIALIZATION

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



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made other people like them. And, they grow up to be positive adults who are admired and respected, and sought after...whose Self-Esteem are regularly reinforced in interactions with other people. They draw not only guidance, but also positive feedback from other people. Can we help our children develop the skills? Yes, we can!

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

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



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Chapter 2

Feedback, Frustration, and Self-Esteem

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

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

FEEDBACK ABOUT BEHAVIOR VS. FEEDBACK ABOUT WORTH

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

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



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true. I sometimes joke that children have a cognitive flaw -- that they trust and believe everything their loving adults tell them! Even outrageous things.

FEEDBACK AT 65 MPH

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

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

"POTENTIALING" AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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



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potential, they are not stupid either. They know that this is a put down. Isn't this the same at your work? When they talk about your potential?

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

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



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Chapter 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

Unfortunately, a child is unable to articulate how and why he/she is a child. That he/she does the things that he/she does because children need to do those things in order to grow and develop. And since they do not have access to this kind of answer, they try to respond in the only way they know how. They put their hands behind her back, looked



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down at the floor, and sway correct gently side to side, and say sheepishly or sullenly, "I don' know." Do we accept this? Unfortunately, often we don't. We may grab his/her chin and tip his/her face towards us. Then scowl... maybe stick a finger in his/her chest, and say in an angry voice, "Don't tell me you don't know! You know why you did that! Now tell me why you did that!" Unable to articulate that children act like children, and with "I don't know" made unavailable to him/her in the face by the angry adult, the child is forced to take the only answer that is left-- the answer that will attack and destroy his/her Self-Esteem. Whether he/she says it or not, whether the adult says it out loud or not, the child is forced to think to him/herself that, " Why did I do that? It must be... it must be that... **I am a bad person!**"

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

THE FOUNDATION OF CHILDREN'S SELF-ESTEEM

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

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

On the other hand, understanding how you are the foundation to your child Self-Esteem can be a powerful tool in promoting both your and your child's Self-Esteem. In future



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

TOO MUCH SELF-ESTEEM?

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

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



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The article concluded that these children had too much Self-Esteem. And, consequently that too much Self-Esteem was dangerous to children and dangerous to society. In actuality, the children that the article describes were actually children with low Self-Esteem! They were correct in that these children had been praised and been rewarded over and over again by their parents all their lives. Too much praise? Now, they're telling us not to praise! That it is possible to praise too much! That would be a simplistic conclusion. However, there is an important point to be gotten from this. In all probability, these parents and other adults were working from a simplistic theory of Self-Esteem -- a theory that says praise in itself (messages of worth, messages of confirmation, cheerleading, and more) is what builds Self-Esteem in children. They were working from an incomplete theory of Self-Esteem; their theory of Self-Esteem is based entirely on what Coopersmith calls significance. However, Coopersmith believes that there are three other important components to Self-Esteem in addition to significance. Subsequent chapters will discuss all the important components to Self-Esteem in more depth.



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Chapter 4

Significance Meets Socialization (& Frustration)

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

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

SIGNIFICANCE ☺

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

SIGNIFICANCE MEETS SOCIALIZATION- ☹

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

As children grow older, we expect that socialization -- the feedback that we had been giving them as to what is appropriate or inappropriate behavior is beginning to be



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integrated. Before they did not know -- they did not understand, therefore they could not have complied. They were just babies! Now.... Now, however, they have been told... And told... And told... Now, they **should** know! The honeymoon is over. Reality sets in. The stress of raising a young child, balancing time, energy, money, and relationships, often begins to take a toll. The behavior that was adorable -- that was tolerable now takes time and energy. And, there is so much to do. So you tell them again... And again... And again. Finally, in frustration you snap, "I told you that! How many times do I have to tell you?!" Just as I mentioned in the previous column that I wanted to train a child how to answer the "why" question, I want to take a kid and train him/her how to answer the "how many times" question too. After the parent asks -- demands, "How many times do I have to tell you that?!" I want to train a child to respond,

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

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

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

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



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Sometimes when parents are not able to understand the developmental issues of young children, they attempt to socialize to children in ways that do not work. With their frustration dealing with the demands of being a parent of a young child, that is often when the messages of significance to the young child begin to break down. However, if you do understand the developmental issues of young children, learn developmentally appropriate ways to socialize young children, and deal with your own frustrations, then you can continue to give positive messages of significance to the young child, while maintaining the sanity of the household... And your sanity too!

SIGNIFICANCE BECOMES "HAVE-TO-DO'S"

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

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

As parents try to be perfect parents, unfortunately, children get another message. Not the message that the parent cares so much about them (although that is experienced), but the message that the parent should and **must** fulfill their every need, and should and **must** protect them from any anxiety, worry, or disappointment. And there develops, instead of



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the fulfilled happy child, the **tyrant toddler!** Or, the **tyrant teen!** (Or, **tyrant spouse,** oh my!) "I want him... I need... I gotta have... I wanna..." (Remember Violet Beauregard in "Willy Wonka in the Chocolate Factory?") The parent tries so hard to satisfy children's sense of entitlement. And when reality happens, and the parent is unable to fulfill the demands, children who have learned to expect this (learned to demand this), instead feel outraged and betrayed.

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



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Chapter 5

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

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

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

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

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

Remember how your toddler worked so hard at getting the puzzle together. There may



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have been a frown on the his/her face as he/she struggled to make it work. It was so hard not to intervene and to help your child. "No! Self!" he/she insisted, because he/she wanted to do it him/herself. Stress was happening, frustration was there; and time after time he/she failed to make it work. Then, after many...many efforts, it all fit together! Remember the look of joy and delight on your child's face. Remember how he/she brought that puzzle to you in triumph? Remember when you do this, and how much you want to share this with others so that they can see your success too? Stress... disappointment... frustration... failure... continued effort... led to.. led to success! And, Self-Esteem grew.

THE MORALITY OF "GOTTA WIN"

There was a young boy who several years ago I worked with in counseling. He threw tremendous tantrums whenever he lost a game. Crying, red faced, screaming, blaming others that they had cheated, throwing the game on the floor, stomping out of the room, and sulking. Sound familiar? Unfortunate, for many parents -- yes. Eventually, his family and his classmates no longer wanted to play with him, or even be around him. The issue for him was not simply that he had to win, but that he hated to lose. More than hated to lose, he couldn't stand to lose. **Losing/failure meant to him that he was unworthy.** He could not tolerate that. The danger for him that he "gotta" win all the time was twofold: first, if he always must win, eventually he may not ever try, compete, or play anymore. If you do not try, that certainly is a way to guarantee that you will not lose. The second possibility since he cannot stand to lose, is that he will do anything and everything in order to win -- in other words, he is at risk of becoming sociopathic. If he must win in order to confirm his worth... If he must win in order to have a sense of worth or be devastated psychologically, then the only morality that counts-- the only one that matters is the morality of winning. Other values such as fairness, respect, honesty, and respect become irrelevant. In fact, unfortunately, values such as honesty, fair play, cooperation, empathy, and compassion become obstacles to always winning, and are to be ignored and even despised.

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

With this young boy, we played a lot of games. By now, most adults were so intimidated by the possibility of him throwing a tantrum that they always lost games to



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him on purpose. I remember the look of shock on his face when after I would not let him win. I would win and he would start a tantrum. I would smile and ask him about how he felt; I would label for him how badly he felt personally... reflecting on how losing made him unworthy in his own heart. Instead of taunting him, rejecting him, or refusing to play with him, like his friends might have done, we would talk about it. I would guide him into define his worth whether or not he won. When he would win, he would of course, be delighted. However he could not win all the time since I would not throw games. Because he could not win all the time, he had to learn how to deal with it. We were able to process it and eventually, he was able to handle winning **or** losing. And, because he is able to handle losing, and he is able to continue to play -- to continue to try; and, consider for himself values such as honesty, fair play, cooperation, empathy, and compassion.

THE "PERFECT MIRROR?"

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

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



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his father or teacher -- especially when they are very young. Later, the messages of significance from their peers become more and more important -- this is, of course, another important issue. For the most part, parents are fairly good at getting messages of significance to their children. Most children go into the outside world with a core of Self-Esteem. Unfortunately, we recognize that this is often not enough.

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

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