Chapter 9

For Parents

Guidelines for Optimal Child Development

> Individuals whose integrity has not been damaged in childhood, who were protected, respected, and treated with honesty by their parents, will be intelligent, responsive, empathic, and highly sensitive in both youth and adulthood. They will take pleasure in life and will feel no need to kill or even hurt others or themselves.
>
> Alice Miller (1987), "The 12 Points"

Today's parents are trying to raise healthy children under difficult, stressful conditions. Research has shown that it is optimal for children to have at least 4 or 5 caring adults to take a serious interest in them. However, many families are faced with circumstances that make this ideal an impossible dream. Often both parents are working hard to support their children and do not have trusted adults to rely on for help with child care. There are increasing numbers of single parents raising their children alone, without the assistance of even one other adult. In addition, our society, in contrast to many other industrialized societies, does not support parents by providing adequate child care for all families.

Aside from these outside pressures, the most significant problems we all face in raising children can be found in our families of origin. Therefore, in order to be effective parents and develop secure attachments with our children, we need to make sense of what happened in our own childhoods. We need to face the painful feelings we experienced as a result of the treatment we received and regain feeling for ourselves as the unique person we are. In recognizing where our beliefs and feelings about children come from, we can gain more control over the defensive behaviors that we feel compelled to act out with our children.

Child-rearing is a highly creative, challenging, and stressful task, and like other creative endeavors, this task requires considerable reflection and thought. Instead of having a rigid or restrictive image of what we want our children to become, we can learn ways of nurturing them and guiding them that would help them express their own natural qualities and unique ways of being. With this goal in mind, it is worthwhile to examine the conditions under which children develop a way of seeing themselves as bad or unlovable and to understand how they develop a critical inner voice.

In this chapter, we focus first on several painful disclosures of parents who had the courage to reveal what they really felt at times in interactions with their children. They honestly admitted feelings and behaviors that they considered to be unacceptable and that caused them to feel ashamed and guilty. They raised issues that most parenting books fail to discuss. Second, we provide guidelines and suggestions that may be helpful to parents in raising their children.

"I swore that I would treat my children differently than my parents treated me, but I find myself doing the exact same things they did."

This parent is describing one of the most mystifying and distressing aspects of parenting. In spite of their best intentions, people find themselves acting in the same negative ways toward their children that their parents acted toward them. By understanding how and why negative parental traits are passed down through the generations, parents can gain control of this process and interrupt the cycle.

This transmission of parents' negative traits through the generations involves three phases: (1) To varying degrees, all of us suffered rejection, deprivation, hostility, and trauma in our formative years. At those times that our parents were out of control, either emotionally or physically, we took on the punishing parent's feelings, thoughts, and attitudes toward us in the form of a critical inner voice. In other words, we assumed the identity of our parents as they were

at their worst, not as they usually were in their everyday lives. (2) We retained this hostile inner voice within us throughout our lives, restricting, limiting, and punishing ourselves, essentially parenting ourselves as we were parented. (3) When we become parents, we feel almost compelled to act out similar patterns of mistreatment on our children. During stressful interactions with our child, we may find ourselves saying and doing things we vowed that we would never do. The situation becomes one of almost looking over our shoulder to see who said the words we have just uttered. Our child, in turn, takes in this outburst of punishing feelings and thoughts as a self-depreciating inner voice, thereby completing the cycle.

For example, in a parenting group, Samantha, 50, revealed that when her daughter was small, she had often resented her because feeding and taking care of her took so much of her time and energy. She said:

> I hated that when she cried, I had to stop everything that I was doing to feed her. It was something that could interrupt me at any time. She needed something and wanted something that I had to respond to, and I felt resentful when I was feeding her. Ever since then, I've felt really ashamed of those feelings. But I also know that I'm starting to see more clearly the way that my mother was with me. Things that I've been vague about are starting to come out clear.
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> I realize that today whenever I feel bad or down, I tell myself things like: *"Don't bother your husband with your problems. Don't bother your friends, stop bothering people. You're such a burden to people!*" But that's exactly the way my mother must have felt toward me, and so I saw my own daughter as a burden. I also remember that sometimes when she would cry, I actually wouldn't hear her, my husband or somebody would have to tell me she was crying, and so there was that time period when she was crying and I wasn't responding to her.

Julie, Samantha's 22-year old daughter, tended to deny her own wants and rarely expressed them. She described a critical inner voice that told her:

> "*Don't ask for anything. You don't deserve anything. Besides, you're so demanding, Just stay out of the way, stay in the background. Nobody wants to give you anything because you're not nice, and you're so demanding. You're a burden to your husband, to your friends, to everybody*."

After identifying the negative thoughts she had toward herself, Julie realized that she perceived her 2-year-old son, Jake, in much the same way she had been seen by her mother. When she was trying to arrange child-care for Jake, she often told herself:

> "*How could you ask anybody to watch him? He's so whiny, clingy, always wanting something. He's is in an awful phase--the terrible twos--so how could you burden anyone with taking care of him? Just take care of him yourself and stop asking for help.*"

Children threaten their parents' defense system by reawakening painful feelings from the past. The innocence, liveliness, and spontaneity of a child can remind us of the hurts in our own childhood. Relating closely with our child threatens to reactivate these old hurts. In these interactions, we may experience anger or resentment toward our child without understanding why.

In addition, many parents experience considerable discomfort when their child passes through stages of development that were particularly painful or traumatic for the parents themselves. During these phases, parents often treat the child in a manner reminiscent of how they were treated at this age.

For example, in a parenting group, Ted spoke about his feelings for his 4-year-old son, Charlie. Ted had wanted a child, specifically a son, for many years. He and his wife went to great lengths, consulting fertility experts and considering many options, before Charlie was finally

born. Now Ted was tortured to find that he could not feel close to his son.

Ted: I've noticed that I am much closer to adults than I am to Charlie. I have a kind of superstition in my mind that when he's older, I'll be able to get closer to him. So I've been searching to find out why that is. I had this thought that I was avoiding Charlie in the same way that I was avoided, and that I wouldn't give to him something that I didn't get for myself. Then I started to remember that my father wasn't there from the time that I was one to the time that I was four-and-a-half.

Dr. Firestone: The point you made was that painful feelings are aroused in you any time you treat Charlie or feel toward Charlie in a way that is different from the way you were treated. That seems to lead to a lot of pain for you. It somehow emphasizes the pain that you went through as a child yourself. So it's difficult to treat him with tenderness and sensitivity when in fact that was different from your own experience.

Your father's absence tormented you; the way you described it, he avoided the family. In some way, you developed the same pattern in relation to Charlie.

Ted: Yes, it's very rare that I ever have any real relations with Charlie. Mostly it's the relation of not being there, even when I'm there.

Dr. Firestone: Even when you're in close quarters, you tend to be insulated, you're saying.

Ted: Right. I was really surprised to see that I'm actually better adapted at having feelings toward adults and even toward other children than toward Charlie.

Dr. Firestone: Why do you think that is?

Ted: Because I won't give to him what I didn't get myself.

Dr. Firestone: And that makes you feel sad.

Ted: It's a combination of shame and a wasted sadness. He's there wanting, just like I was there wanting, and there's no real reason. I don't even believe that I'm incapable, but I

believe I'm acting irrationally.

Being loved and valued by their children can make parents feel a poignant, painful sadness that they find difficult to endure. Many pull away from their child after having this kind of close contact. In fact, the unwillingness of defended parents to allow their suppressed emotions to reemerge during tender moments with their children may be the major reason they find it difficult to sustain loving, affectionate relationships with their children.

"I don't feel loving feelings toward my child all the time."

First, it is essential that all parents know that unconditional love does not exist. It is a myth that has become a basic part of our heritage and system of values. Second, belief in this unrealistic ideal contributes to feelings of guilt in parents because as human beings, they have limitations and weaknesses, and they are not perfect and completely loving. Therefore, it is absurd for parents to attack themselves for falling short of this ideal.

The ambivalent attitudes we have toward our children are simply a reflection of the ambivalent attitudes we have toward ourselves. The fact that we love our children and want to nurture them does not invalidate the resentment and other negative feelings we have, at times, toward them. Similarly, the fact that we sometimes have negative, hostile feelings toward our children does not negate our love or concern for them. We express ambivalent attitudes in all of our relationships to some degree. To the extent that we fail to recognize these conflicting attitudes toward ourselves and our children, we may be insensitive to our children and cause them unnecessary emotional pain. Only through developing compassion for ourselves and understanding how we learned the negative attitudes we have toward ourselves can we provide the warmth, affection, love, and control necessary for our children's well-being.

Many parents tend to deny weaknesses or unpleasant traits in themselves, perceive them instead in a particular child, and then punish the imagined or exaggerated trait in the child. When

this occurs, the child is basically being used as a waste receptacle or dumping ground for traits the parents attempt to disown in themselves. Often different children in a family are assigned different labels or are singled out to be "containers" for the projected traits of their parents.

If you find yourself feeling critical or punitive toward your child, it is helpful to ask yourself, "What am I angry at him/her for? Why am I so angry? Does it really just have to do with him/her? Could I have these feelings toward myself for these same things?"

For example, a mother with a prudish view about sex disowned sexual feelings in herself and instead continually worried about her daughter's emerging sexuality. Fearing that her daughter would become promiscuous as she reached her teens, she became obsessed with her daughter's activities, read her e-mails, and searched her belongings and schoolwork for clues that she was involved with boys. Later, when the girl attended college, she fulfilled her mother's predictions by becoming sexually involved with a number of men. In general, children accept the negative labels their parents assign to them, all the while maintaining an idealized view of the parents. They often become imprisoned for life in the narrow, restrictive labeling system that formed their identity within their family.

It is unfortunate that when children are damaged during their formative years, they often become difficult to like and love as they grow older. By the time they reach school-age, many children are no longer the innocently loving and lovable creatures they once were. They may have been so bent out of shape that they have begun to exhibit negative behavior patterns and character traits such as whining, sulking, complaining, and manipulating. Contrary to popular opinion, these children are not simply "going through a phase."

It is more constructive for you to try to find out the cause of your children's disruptive behavior than to continually punish the behavior itself. For example, try to develop a sensitive interest in your child's arguments and expressions of sibling rivalry instead of allowing the in-

fighting to continue. Unless they are understood and challenged, these offensive habits will persist and develop into more sophisticated defensive behaviors as your child reaches adolescence or adulthood.

If you are a parent with a child or children who are struggling with misbehavior, it may be helpful to ask yourself these questions. What is the child's behavior saying to you? Is he or she angry? Hurt? Frustrated? Scared? Do you think your child may be using this behavior to defend against pain or sadness? Are certain events currently affecting your child's mood or behavior? Are there certain behaviors that your child engages in that are unpleasant and make you angry at him or her? Do these behaviors reflect the ways you were seen or taught that children were? Have you talked with your child and attempted to find out what he or she is really feeling?

Unfortunately, many parents do not allow their children an opportunity to deal with distressing events. They discourage their children from expressing their painful reactions, from crying or talking about their feelings. In this manner, parents often perpetuate their children's suffering. By not providing them with an outlet for dealing with their pain, they teach them to suppress their feeling reactions.

Guidelines for Child-Rearing

The ultimate goal of parents is to help their child develop into a decent, likable adult who enjoys the rewards of a well-balanced life. As stated throughout this chapter, regaining feeling about your own childhood experiences is the key element that will enable you to achieve this goal. In addition, there are some guidelines that can be of further help to you as a parent.

Avoid Unnecessary Rules

It is helpful for parents to avoid unnecessary restrictions, rules, and standards. It is remarkable how few rules or restrictions are really necessary to accomplish our goals of

effectively socializing our children. Our goals as parents can be better realized when the rules we do make are about significant issues and are consistently upheld. Instead of having a direct confrontation on trivial issues, such as “You have to eat your vegetables or you can’t have dessert,” we can establish a limited number of rules and then firmly enforce them.

We need to clearly state our standards and rules to our children. As a child matures, we can explain the reasoning behind the rules and teach the importance of learning self-control. In situations where definite rules apply, we would not act as though our child has a choice in the matter. For example, if you set a specific bedtime for your six-year-old, obviously you would not ask him each night if he wanted to go to bed and then insist that he go anyway. You would simply exert your authority in a straightforward manner: “Now you are going to bed,” not “Would you like to go to bed?”

Be a Positive Role Model

Psychologists have found that children really “do as parents do, not as they say.” Being a positive role model for good behavior is far more powerful than specific training or disciplinary measures in raising children. These processes of identification and imitation overshadow any statements, rules, and prescriptions for good behavior. Children develop behaviors through observing their parents in day-to-day life. Every behavior that a parent engages in should be worthy of imitating because children will imitate it.

If parents engage in behaviors that are influenced by the critical inner voice, their children are destined to mimic them as they grow older. These behaviors include playing the victim, self-denial or giving up pleasure and happiness, a pattern of addiction, passivity, dishonesty, phoniness, prejudice, vanity, tightness or lack of generosity, sarcasm, indifference, intrusiveness, and irritability, among others.

As you read the previous chapters, did you identify any personality traits or behaviors in

yourself that you consider to be toxic or undesirable? Are these imitations of your parents' behaviors? Are your children imitating any of these ways of acting? Which traits or behaviors in yourself do you feel are most harmful in that your child will probably imitate them? Simply having an awareness of these issues often has a positive effect.

Exercise 9.1, The Firestone Voice Scale for Parents

Filling our the questionnaire will help you become more aware of critical inner voices you are experiencing that are having an impact on how you parent.

Reward Rather than Punish Your Children

Psychologists have found that "positive reinforcement" or reward tends to increase the frequency of the behavior that is being rewarded. They have also found that "negative reinforcement" or punishment is not as effective in its ability to stop the expression of undesirable behaviors. Children respond positively to smiling, verbal praise, and physical affection. On the other hand, punishment tends to arouse negative emotions such as fear, shame, guilt, and anger. Children who are harshly punished rarely remember the object lesson, but do remember the fear they felt at the time they were being punished.

Parents who are continually nagging, complaining, or lecturing are usually unsuccessful in disciplining their children. These forms of punishment arouse the child's resentment and anger but fail to control his or her behavior. It is better to use a combination of approval, tangible rewards, genuine acknowledgment (not false praise or flattery), and some form of negative consequence for misbehavior. We suggest that parents not offer monetary rewards for good behavior because this practice tends to place the child's behavior on a commercial basis rather than a personal one.

Avoid Physical Punishment

It is important to never spank, beat, or physically abuse a child. If you need to restrain a

child, for example to keep him or her from running into the street, you can hold the child firmly and talk to him or her sternly or even move him or her physically to get him or her to go where you wish, without striking the child.

The more you develop as a person in your own life, the better able you will be to deal with your child's annoying behaviors. As parents come to accept and understand all their feelings, including their angry feelings, they are better able to control the expression or acting out of aggressive behaviors toward their children.

Becoming more accepting of anger is a learning process that takes some time. You can learn strategies for dealing with your anger at those times you find your fuse getting short. Experts recommend that you give yourself a cooling-off period by taking a few steps back from your child, breathing deeply, and slowly counting backwards from 20 to zero. When you feel more in control of your anger, you can distract your child from the situation by listening to music or reading a story together.

It is also recommended that, if possible, you leave the situation in someone else's hands and take a break to calm down. This is one of the many reasons it is beneficial to include other interested and compassionate adults (family members or friends) in raising your children. It broadens your overall perspective on your child, and it is helpful to be able to share the responsibility of raising children with others. Sharing the emotional and physical care of the child can ease the pressures of parenting and help you become a more relaxed and effective parent.

Exercise 9.2, What Do You Think When You Are Angry At Your Child?

If you have problems with anger, you might want to write down your angry thoughts on the left-hand side of the page in Exercise 9.2. Do any of these angry thoughts seem to reflect your own negative self-attitudes or critical inner voices? Write these down in the middle column.

Do any of these thoughts remind you of things that were said to you as a child? Record these statements in the right-hand column.

For example, on the left-hand side of the page, one father wrote down a thought that expressed his irritation with his 3-year-old son. “That kid is driving me crazy.” He then recalled that when he was growing up, this was how his mother had described him to her friends and relatives. In addition, whenever she was really angry, she yelled at him so loud the neighbors could hear, “You’re driving me crazy!” In reflecting on this pattern of angry thinking, this father realized that he had numerous critical inner voices telling him, “*You’re always making trouble. Why can’t you just stay in the background? No one really likes you. You drive the people crazy at work. Why don’t you just shut up!”* As you write down your angry thoughts and any negative voices you have about yourself, you may begin to recall situations in your childhood where you were treated harshly by a parent, relative, sibling, or teacher.

Avoid using idle threats of future punishment to enforce your rules. How many times have you heard parents repeatedly warning their children: “If you don’t behave yourself, you won’t get to go to the movies, or the park, or out to eat with us.” “If you don’t stop what you’re doing, you’re going to get a spanking.” Many parents threaten actions that they have no intention of taking. At other times, they fail to back up their threats with action. It is clear that threats which are not carried out are ineffective and undermine parents’ authority. What you are teaching your child in these instances is that he or she can misbehave and there are no consequences.

Avoid Judgmental Attitudes

Judgmental or moralistic attitudes act to diminish a child’s self-esteem. They tend to teach children that they are bad because they cry or feel sad, because they have needs, wants, and desires, or because they feel angry or resentful. Moralistic disciplinary methods, where children

are seen as sinful or bad, have a devastating effect on them. Children are not inherently evil or born bad. Many parents, although they do not consciously subscribe to this belief, implicitly believe that children are bad and tend to treat them accordingly. On the other hand, children who are fortunate in having decent, moral parents do not need to be taught moral principles; they will learn ethical behavior and decency through observing and imitating their parents. Lectures and object lessons about goodness and righteousness are often counterproductive and can be damaging, especially when parents fail to live up to their own principles.

Avoid teaching children that they are bad or selfish for wanting or having desires. Children's wants are an important part of their personal identity. They are indications of their unique interests. Pay attention to what lights your child up and appeals especially to him or her. Support this aspect of your child's personality.

While disciplining your child, it is important to stress the fact that your child's behavior is irritating or offensive, not that he or she is a bad person. Your child will know that you are not angry at him or her as a person, but at his or her behavior, which he or she can change. Afterward, reassure your child that he or she is not a bad person. You can also use humor to help your child get out of a bad mood and stop misbehaving. Humor reinforces the child's positive self-image while gently attacking the unpleasant behavior. This does not include sarcasm or hurtful barbs that some parents use in order to control or humiliate their children; to the contrary, this style of humor is respectful of the child.

Exercise 9.3, You As a Parent: Your Critical Inner Voice/The Real You

If you hold judgmental, condemning attitudes toward yourself as a parent, it certainly interferes with your being an effective parent. It is important to separate our real perceptions of ourselves as parents from those of our critical inner voice. Exercise 9.3 will help you to separate your critical inner voices about you as a parent from your more realistic thoughts.

On the left-hand side of the page, write your critical inner voices about yourself as a parent. On the right-hand side of the page, write a more realistic view of yourself as a parent. There may be real faults or attitudes you have toward yourself; after all, no parent is perfect, but it is important to separate these attitudes from a hostile view of yourself that is punishing toward you and does not lead to improving your behavior. If there are real behaviors or attitudes we hold as parents that we don't like in ourselves, it is important to identify them and work toward changing them so we can become the best parents we can be.

Let Your Children Love You

Our children need to be able to feel their loving feelings for us, for the people we really are behind our roles as parents. If we deny this opportunity to our children, they will suffer emotionally. We need to learn to be receptive to our children's spontaneous expressions of affection and love toward us. This seems obvious, yet it may be the most difficult task faced by us as parents. We must pay close attention to our reactions to a loving expression from our child and the feelings that it arouses in us. We can then attempt to tolerate these feelings and suffer through this poignant sadness and pain without pushing our child away.

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We can best help our children not by sacrificing ourselves for them, but by trying to fulfill our own lives. When we are involved in an honest pursuit of our own goals, we serve as positive role-models for our children. To teach our children how to live "the good life," we have to genuinely value ourselves, accept all of our feelings, wants, and priorities, and actively participate in our own lives. We need to live according to our own wants and desires, from our real self, instead of acting out the dictates of the critical inner voice. To the extent that we challenge the destructive thoughts of the inner voice and retain our capacity for feeling and a willingness to invest fully in our lives, we will have a profound positive effect on the personal

development of our children and on their future.

There is hope in understanding how people form their defenses and how destructive thoughts are learned and transmitted from parent to child. There is much reason for optimism because we have found that people, by not surrendering to the critical inner voice and its negative programming, can break the chain of pain and defensive behaviors that is passed from generation to generation. If we continue to develop ourselves personally and strengthen our real selves, we will be better parents and our children will have a stronger sense of themselves.

Development of More Compassionate Child-Rearing Practices Based on Constructive Attitude Change

In isolating the traumatic experiences that were harmful to them in their formative years, parents began to formulate positive attitudes and countermeasures that served as constructive guidelines to child-rearing practices which, in turn, minimized damage to their offspring. In becoming more compassionate toward themselves, they developed a sensitive interest in their children and initiated steps to prevent their children from incorporating an image of themselves as "bad." They learned the importance of not labeling children's wants as greedy or selfish; instead, they supported the positive strivings of their children that would give them a sense of worth. They were more successful in avoiding negative or destructive interactions with their children, as well as offering them experiences that would enhance their self-esteem.

To illustrate, one father's change in attitude is apparent in the following transcription:

FATHER: I've realized a number of things about the way I treat children and the way other people treat children since we've been talking. One of the things I realized was the frequency and the routineness of talking to children in terms of good and bad, that almost everything that a child is told is based on good and bad. Whether he obeys the parent or not, he's good or bad. "Are you going to be a good boy and do this?" or "You're bad when you do that." So I've made a real effort to talk to my own kids, why I feel that way, and what happened to me. I feel hopeful that I can change that pattern and that I can break the chain from generation to generation.

CONCLUSION

The dimension of our parenting groups that differentiates them from other forms of group psychotherapy is their dual focus: (1) on parents' attitudes toward their children and (2) on the experiences parents went through in their own childhoods. This dual concentration helps parents have more compassion for themselves by developing feeling for what happened to them as children. Regaining feeling for themselves may well be the key element that enabled them to alter their child-rearing practices in a positive direction.

The purpose, therefore, is for parents to develop an empathic understanding of the sources of their limitations and to see their child from that same perspective--that is, to pass on this compassionate view to their offspring. In this sense, the format of the parenting groups may be the most effective psychotherapy for the parents themselves. Consideration for their children's well-being acts as a strong motivating force for parents. Taking advantage of the opportunity to modify their destructive responses to their child helps them in their own healing process. Indeed, it appears that only through understanding themselves can parents really change the attitudes and feelings they express covertly and overtly toward their children.

The procedure of identifying negative thoughts toward oneself and toward one's children was found to be very effective when applied in the parents' group setting. The group format is both economical and efficient for utilization as preventive mental hygiene. We have found that we can generalize from the knowledge and experience of the parents in the groups depicted here, despite the fact that many of the participants were quite knowledgeable about psychological issues, and that they had an unusual support system available to them.

On a preventive level, it is vital to recognize the issues that are involved in breaking the chain of emotional and physical child abuse perpetuated through the generations and to intervene, wherever possible, in cases where infants and children are experiencing emotional problems and maladjustment (Broussard, 1979; Fraiberg, Adelson, & Shapiro, 1980; Greenspan, 1981). The process of attitude change demonstrated in these parenting groups appears to be a powerful psychotherapy, both for parents and their offspring. More formal studies are needed to explore further the possibilities and potentialities of utilizing this specialized group therapy process in an overall mental health program.