REPAIRING THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

The parent-child relationship is being assaulted from many directions these days. Parents are under the gun of mounting economic pressures resulting in long work hours, and often more than one job. Our 24-hour a day culture has created a job market that never goes to sleep, and many parents find themselves working hours outside of the usual nine to five workday.

The parent-child relationship is being assaulted from many directions these days. Parents are under the gun of mounting economic pressures resulting in long work hours, and often more than one job. Our 24-hour a day culture has created a job market that never goes to sleep, and many parents find themselves working hours outside of the usual nine to five workday. This leaves big gaps in childcare arrangements, especially since the school day has continued to remain somewhere between the hours of 7AM and 4PM. Another cultural development that has significantly impacted the family is the explosion of mass media and mass communication, particularly internet style. This evolutionary step in technology has permanently changed the environment within which parents are trying to monitor and control the development of their children. The massive exposure to all kinds of information, and particularly information that is unhealthy or beyond the scope of a child's developmental age, has placed parents in the untenable position of battling outside influences that tear at the parent-child relationship rather than assisting to safeguard family values, parental guidelines, and promote normal psychological growth.

All of this is exacerbated if you happen to be a single parent trying to do it all. These parents are often just plain tired and worn out, and the idea of trying to sift through the problems that confront their children after a long workday when its time to cook dinner, do homework, and get everyone into bed can seem daunting to say the least. Nevertheless, the strength of the parent-child relationship is more important than ever as it is our primary means of keeping our children safe, helping them to navigate the world, and assisting them to develop personal strengths for making the right choices. The problem is how to make sure that the parent-child relationship is strong and meets the child's needs in spite of some of the circumstances just described. For many, the relationship is already in need of repair. What's offered here are some of the more proven methods for enhancing the relationship along with some tips on how to begin the process of repair.

SIGNS OF PROBLEMS

The first step is to evaluate the state of your relationship with your child or children. You can get a pretty clear picture by asking the following questions:

- Do you know your child's likes, dislikes, choice of activities, favorite TV shows, favorite clothes to wear, best and worst subjects in school, etc., and if so, how detailed is your knowledge about these things? For example, you might know that your son likes video games, but do you also know that he likes two or three in particular? Do you know what it is that excites him about these particular kinds of games?

- Do you know your child's friends, what they do together, what kinds of struggles they encounter, what they have in common, and so forth? This is particularly important if you have a teen. Do you know the interrelationships of your teen's peer group? Do you talk about such things together? Does your teen want to tell you about her friends?

- How effective are your attempts at discipline? Do you find that most of your communication with your child is around issues of discipline? Are you having a lot of problems with disrespect, defiance, and chronic misbehavior?

- How well is your child doing in terms of developmental tasks and behavior? Is she regressed? Are there chronic problems with schoolwork or school behavior? Do you feel she is able to maintain responsibilities appropriate for her age?

- Is your child overly whiny or attention seeking, or does he show any signs of having inappropriate separation anxiety from you?
- Are their any overt signs of low self-worth, low self-esteem, anxiety or depression, and if so, are you able to talk to your child about these feelings?
- Is your child overly aggressive, involved in deviant behavior, chronically angry, or conversely overly withdrawn and passive?

If your answers were less than satisfactory to more than two of these, then it is likely that there is too much distance between you and your child, and that he or she is reacting to the distance in a negative manner. This doesn't mean that you are a bad parent. It just signals that you need to reestablish some closeness with your child by making yourself more available and attentive. One caveat to keep in mind is that some of the above problems can be caused by other factors such as ADHD, drug abuse, divorce, peer problems, and so forth. Nevertheless, these situations can also significantly tax the parent-child relationship, and in some cases professional counseling is necessary which we highly recommend in addition to the ideas outlined below.

METHODS FOR REPAIRING THE RELATIONSHIP

If you've done any reading about the parent-child relationship, you know that the main advice given is that you need to spend time with your children. This is absolutely true and there really is no way to get around this very important step. All relationships are built upon contact that is characterized by caring, dependability, trust, empathy, acceptance, energy, and time. Relationships that are not tended to and nurtured on a regular basis become problematic and eventually erode or break down. So the first rule of thumb is that you must figure out a way to make some "relationship time" with your child that is separate from discipline or tasks. The second part of the equation has to do with how the time is to be used and what is to be accomplished as a result. There are four types of activity that are particularly conducive to building the parent-child relationship while also accomplishing the goals of involvement, self-exploration, recognition, problem-solving and expression of feelings. These are play, conversation, participation in activities outside the home, and verbal recognition.

Play

For younger children (all the way up to 10), play is the primary mechanism for the expression of feelings, communication, and solving emotional problems. It is both a window for stepping into and understanding your child's world, and a vehicle for creating a solid bond between the two of you that is felt by the child through your interest and involvement at their level. You can begin by setting aside some time each day (or as often as you can) to play with your child. The number of times per week will depend on your schedule as well as on the amount of repair that's needed. If the relationship is very strained, then try and play at least five times a week to start and back off as the relationship improves. Keep in mind that any amount of playtime is better than none.

How to Play. For younger children, you might clear a space on the floor and announce that you would like to play, or you can join in with play that's already in progress. For older children, it is more effective to play in the child's room. Either way, let the child be "the boss," meaning that they decide what they want to do and what toys or materials are to be used. Let them guide you as to how you can join in or interact and then follow their lead. Don't ask questions other than to clarify their instructions. If you have not done this before, you might find that your child is a little wary at first of your participation. If that's the case, then sit and observe until you're invited to join in. You can try making comments about what you see going on, but you want to be sure that your comments are strictly descriptive and carry no judgement.

For children who can't seem to get started, you can initiate play by simply beginning to play with something yourself. For example, you could begin coloring in a book or lining up toy cars, or engage in any activity that you know your child likes. This will usually peak the child's interest and before long, he or she will join in. Sometimes they join in by taking charge and instructing or correcting you.

Rules During Play. The important rules to observe during playtime are as follows: (1) the child needs to be in control during playtime; (2) absolutely no conversation about discipline should occur, nor should their be any hint of judgement or criticism on your part; and (3) other distractions need to be eliminated for the duration of the play session. If you have only 25 or 30 minutes, that's fine. You just need to be sure that you make some arrangements to avoid distractions. Take the phone off the hook, have your husband or a friend watch the other kids, and so forth.

The more you engage in playtime with your younger children, the less struggles you will have with discipline and gaining cooperation. Your undivided attention during playtime combined with the child's opportunity to be in charge will go far to satisfy his or her needs for attention and power.

Conversation

Just as play is the most powerful tool to use with younger children in sustaining the relationship, conversation is the tool par excellence to be used with adolescents. The kind of conversation we are talking about here is used to do several things: (1) promote expression of feelings; (2) facilitate self-exploration and identity building; (3) identify problems and solve conflicts; and (4) communicate interest, understanding and empathy. It is very important to keep these goals in mind as you engage in conversation with your child or teen as it is easy to digress into disciplinary problems, criticism, or attempts to push your own agenda. This kind of conversation should create an atmosphere of exploration and have a give and take quality to it, although I would suggest that it's helpful to be more of a listener and let the teen do most of the talking. Avoid drifting into lectures. This is deadly and will defeat the purpose. Remember, your job is to listen and facilitate.

How to Proceed. You can set aside a special time for conversation, but generally it works best with teens if it is more spontaneous and occurs at a time when they are not distracted by other activities. If you haven't done much of this before, it will seem awkward at first and your teen might ask what you're doing, or even be rather cynical and standoffish. If that's the case, then it's best to sincerely state your purpose. You can say something along the lines of "I've noticed that we really are not in sync lately, and I think some of it is my fault. I haven't really given you the time you need, but I really am interested in what's going on with you." If that doesn't get the ball rolling, then begin with some general questions. Tell your son or daughter that you want to know what they're interested in, what it's like to go to their school, what their experience is of their teachers, what their friends are like, and so forth. Why do they like this person and not that one? What's is it like to be a teen these days? How is it different from when you were a teen? What are they struggling with? Basically, you want to know what it's like to be them.

Once you get in the habit of regular conversations such as this, you can move on to helping your teen think about her identity. What are the qualities and values she aspires to? Who are her mentors? What kinds of relationships is she hoping to develop, or what kind is she engaged in now? Your job is to reflect back what you hear in such a way that implies that you know what has been said and you understand the point of view. You may not agree with or like everything you hear, but you will find out much more about who your child is if you allow this sort of open conversation.

Conversation is not just for teens, but can begin as early as your child learns to talk. The idea is to establish the habit of conversing in an open manner so that your children feel free to express their feelings and ideas to you as well as to feel that they can gain your support when a problem occurs. With both teens and younger children, sometimes all that's necessary is to just be attentive and present as your son or daughter chatters on about something that is of interest to them. A computer whiz might bend your ear with the details of how to maneuver software or create new programs. Your young teen daughter might chatter endlessly about the various goings on among her immediate group of friends. Your simple attention and reflective comments are the tools in this case for allowing your child to feel understood, important, and valued. As you build this base of understanding and empathy, you will find that your children will view you as someone who can help them when they have problems.

Participation in Outside Activities

So far we've been talking about one-on-one interaction between parents and children within their own environment. Another avenue for enhancing the parent-child relationship is to participate in activities outside the home. This extends the parent-child relationship into the community thereby helping the child to maintain that sense of specialness and love while operating in the world. Such activities can continue to be one-on-one such as going out to eat together, taking in movies, engaging in singular sports like playing tennis or riding bikes, and so forth. When I was eleven years old, my dad took me grocery shopping every Saturday followed by grabbing lunch at the drugstore next door. As a young girl, I looked forward to this regular outing with my dad. It was something special that just he and I did together and it always gave us (I should say me) an opportunity to talk. It was a ritual that facilitated a feeling of security for me as well as a sense of being loved and important. Such experiences can have a far-reaching impact on your child's sense of self as well as her ability to connect with others.

Equally important to this kind of singular experience is the involvement of parents in their children's extracurricular or school activities. Seeing your mom or dad in the stands at the basketball game when you are playing, or feeling their admiration as they watch you perform in a school play, or maybe catching a glimpse of the understanding in their eyes when you miss your lines . . . All of these sorts of experiences spell interest, recognition, and involvement to your children. The feeling that someone is rooting for you whether you succeed or not, is very powerful. Such participation in your child's activities or endeavors provides a certain kind of acceptance and recognition as well as interest that will go a long way in teaching them how to perform and participate in the larger community.

About Verbal Recognition. The last mechanism for enhancing the parent-child relationship that was offered in the introductory paragraph is "verbal recognition." This technique is somewhat involved and requires more space for explanation, so I have offered it as a separate article entitled "Giving Recognition." Try using this technique or any of the others described above on a consistent basis for a month or more, and I think you will see marked improvement in your relationship with your child as well as a reduction in behavior problems.

LOVE AND EMPATHY

Since this is opening article for *The Successful Parent*, it seems appropriate that we begin our discussion by trying to identify some of the most basic ingredients of the parent-child relationship. In other words, if someone were to ask "What are the three most important aspects of parenting?", what would our answer be? To my way of thinking, the basic building blocks of all parent-child relationships are love, limits, and empathy. Okay, that sounds great, but what exactly does it mean? Let's look at some basic definitions and then consider how each element contributes to children's overall development.

LOVE

"Love" conjures up all kinds of ideas and associations ranging from a deep feeling of attachment and desire to simply providing for the wants and needs of another. These certainly can apply and have a place in the discussion, but what we want to focus on is how we can define love in terms of the way a parent feels toward his or her child. For those of you who are already experienced parents, you may have no problem in immediately accessing that feeling you have for your children, but others of you may find yourselves having feelings of ambivalence, especially if your children are difficult to handle or cause you undue stress. For our purposes, let's talk about love from the vantage point of two specific ideas: attachment and dependency.

When children are first born, they are wholly dependent upon the care provided by the parent(s). As the parent attends to the child and provides for all the physical needs such as feeding,

bathing, changing, etc., and, more importantly, daily nurturing, the child builds up an attachment to the parent and that attachment is characterized by a positive sense of trust. This is the first experience of love that the child receives from the parent and is actually the basic building block for the ongoing relationship with not only the parent(s), but later with others.

Over time, this attachment deepens and becomes more complex as the parent attends to the increasing dependency needs that require not only physical care and nurturing, but also daily guidance, attention, and at times, play and entertainment during those early years. In fact, dependency remains a basic need for much of childhood and into adolescence until children begin to form their own identities. Love is the capacity to provide for these basic dependency needs while allowing for the development of a strong, positive attachment that is based on the parents' ability to meet both the child's emotional and physical needs. So far, then, we see that love entails much more than positive feelings towards the child. It is an active part of the relationship that is based on nurturing and the parent's ability to allow the child to be dependent. Independence is an outgrowth of having first been dependent.

LIMITS

As the child grows, love begins to have a second demand and that is the demand to set limits. Actually, limit-setting can be one of the more difficult tasks of parenting because it requires that we set aside our desire to always see our children "happy." Further, it requires us to be consistent, which any parent knows takes a lot of energy.

Why are limits so important? Because they teach our children how to function in the world. If parents don't set limits early in life, life will set those limits in a big way, often resulting in suffering that could have been avoided. A second outgrowth of limit-setting is the development of self-discipline and the formation of a conscience. (See "Helping Children Build a Conscience). We know that we must set consistent limits for our child so that he or she can internalize our strength, and begin to form some sense of safety in the world that comes from the ability to contain one's own impulses and behave in productive ways. Limit-setting usually begins around eighteen months of age when your child is able to walk fairly easily, and has developed enough cognition (brain power) to become interested in the world around him. What a delightful world it is, and isn't it fun to touch and handle everything. Better yet, what can be picked up probably tastes good too! If you have young children, you know all about that. In any case, limit-setting may begin at a young age, but it continues right up until the time your children become adults and leave home, and sometimes longer if they have difficulty growing up. Moreover, limit-setting becomes increasingly difficult in these later years because children become teens, and they certainly feel they know more than you ever have or will. Nevertheless, all children, regardless of age, need parents to hold the line, especially when it is in their best interest. Setting limits is an act of love. It prepares your child for adult life.

EMPATHY

Finally, we need to consider the whole idea of empathy. Empathy simply defined means the capacity to put oneself in another's place and understand how they feel and what their point of view is. Easier said than done. Most people think we naturally come by empathy, but that's not necessarily true. Definitely, some are more predisposed to being empathetic than others, but it is up to parents to teach their children how to be empathetic. So, why is empathy important? It is the basis of all successful relationships, and the basis of having a fully activated conscience. It is what keeps us from taking advantage of others, from committing crimes, and from bringing harm to our fellow neighbor. More than that, the capacity for empathy is the foundation of all of the higher aspirations of human beings. On the basic level, it is what makes one a good citizen. On a grander scale, it is what drives saints such as Mother Teresa. Without the ability to empathize with others, we would perish as a species.

So, now that I have your attention, the questions is, "How do I teach my child to be empathetic?". There are several ways. First and foremost is by example. In other words, your child will naturally internalize your feelings and behavior towards him or her. Simply put, if you treat your child with empathy and understanding, he will treat others the same way. That means that you have to see your child as a separate person who has his own

individual temperament, own ideas (however naïve they may be), and likes and dislikes. He also has his own feelings. The parent(s)' job is to try and understand who your child is, what drives him, how he reacts to things, and then to verbalize these things in such a way that he feels understood. If I had to put anything in capital letters here, it would be to treat your child with the same respect you would like to have from others. Understand his point of view even if it clashes with yours. The point is to allow your child to express himself.

You might be saying "and what about the stuff she said about limit-setting?" "Am I supposed to be so understanding that they can just do what they want because that's how they feel?" No, No, and No!!! You listen to how they feel, you see if you can bend to their wishes if it is the right thing to do, and you do treat them respectfully even when they are opposing you. However, part of learning empathy is to examine how one's feelings and desires are going to impact others. If your child takes your brand new stopwatch outside to time himself running the 50-yard dash without permission, and then leaves the watch on the ground resulting in damage to it, you might be able to sympathize with the desire to improve his running speed and the need to time the sprints using a good timing device that just happened to be handy (and you weren't around to ask for permission at the time). You can sympathize with all of that, and even say so, but what about your child's capacity to understand how you might feel when someone takes something of yours without permission and then destroys it out of carelessness? You must drive this point home and the way you do that is simply by offering consequences. Not yelling, and not in any way that is degrading to you child, but you do want them to know you are displeased. They should feel remorse in having destroyed something of yours, and that remorse needs to be based in the ability to feel empathy for you. The consequences might be having them replace the stopwatch with allowances and extra money they earn working, writing an apology that expresses how they might feel if the same had happened to them, or better writing out how they have felt when someone else was careless with something of theirs. The point is, you must help your child develop a natural sense of empathy for others as well as remorse when an infraction is committed. Then, give them the chance to repair the situation. This will avoid excessive guilt (self-deprecating guilt) which is not healthy, but will teach remorse which is necessary and a part of having empathy for others.

FINAL THOUGHTS

To summarize, then, I think we can say that what's been offered here is really an expanded definition of parent-child love. Love is first based on the development of a positive attachment with the parent(s) that fulfills early dependency needs, and then is shaped by the process of setting limits and teaching empathy both through our interaction with our child, and through the child's interactions with others. So, not only are love, limits, and empathy the building blocks of the parent-child relationship, they are the key to the child's healthy psychological growth and capacity to have fulfilling adult relationships in the future. In fact, we go on learning these lessons our whole lives, but hopefully, if we can provide a solid base for our children early on, the lessons will not be too painful but rather lead to joy and fulfillment.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP

Most everyone is familiar with the phrase "Daddy's little girl." It connotes the special relationship that begins to appear between fathers and daughters somewhere around six to seven years of age. Up until that time, mom has been the primary person in the young girl's life, but as the child moves into the early middle childhood years (six through eleven), a growing need for the father's influence and affections begin to surface. This shift is due to the fact that there are certain aspects of a girl's development and growth that are more directly attributed to her father. These aspects of growth fall into two categories, which I'd like to briefly outline here.

The first of these important contributions is related to the development of the girl's ability to achieve, be competent, pursue goal-oriented activity, and compete. That is not to say that mothers don't have a lot of influence in these areas too, but rather that these specific qualities which are usually associated with masculinity are embodied more by fathers, who in turn have more influence in instilling them in their daughters. There is a well-known author

named Ken Wilber (1991) who talks about these qualities in terms of "doing" versus "being." "Doing" is concerned with achievement, production, action, control, and competition, whereas "being" encompasses the qualities of connectedness, nurturing, acceptance, and allowing. Doing is associated more with masculinity (father) and being with femininity (mother), although we know that all of us have some combination of each of these qualities.

For young girls, it seems especially important that they please their fathers and gain approval from them in relation to achievements and accomplishments. The desire to achieve in school, sports, the arts, or any specific area of talent provides a special link between father and daughter that assists in the growing sense of competence that develops as the girl moves toward womanhood. There are many examples of daughters who have followed in their father's footsteps as they choose careers, go to college, or simply take up an occupation. We know this is quite common among fathers and sons, but for daughters the meaning is slightly different. For sons it signifies coming into one's manhood, whereas for daughters the emphasis is more on achieving a level of competence and confidence that open's the way for entrance into the world of work. I would add a footnote to this conversation which is to acknowledge that men's and women's roles have changed greatly over the last three or four decades. Many women are now involved in roles that have traditionally belonged more to males, and so the modeling done by mothers and fathers has also changed significantly. Even so, there are still particular influences and contributions that are provided by each parent. For our little girl, dad's approval and applause for her achievements in "doing" types of roles and activities has a very special meaning that follows her into adulthood and ultimately expands her involvement in career or occupational pursuits.

The second very important contribution of fathers to their daughter's development has to do with the reinforcement of femininity and self-esteem that can only be derived from interactions with one's father or a father substitute. Mom can do whatever she can to help her daughter feel good about herself as a physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual person. All of that is utterly and endlessly needed by the daughter, however, from the father there is a unique need. This is the need for the daughter to have her femininity reaffirmed at a safe distance. After all, it is not mom that daughters flirt with and show off for; it is dad. There develops slowly over time in our young lady the need to feel attractive and empowered that way in the eyes of dad. Some of the drive has its roots in the process of pulling away from mom as the exclusively most important person in her world. To do this and have a strong link to another adult, she experiments with dad in a number of ways, while competing with mom for his attention. One of those techniques is flirting. If she gets dad's attention, she feels pretty, capable and ultimately less in need of dad. Moreover, if she feels she has dad's eye, she will feel far more certain to have less anticipation of rejection by her peers.

Now keep in mind that all of this is done with strict boundaries and safe distance. If daughter comes to dad wearing a new dress with a devilish gleam in her eye, he simply says, "Very nice," and smiles. The idea is to avoid any reaction to the seductive qualities evident in the flirting, nor should dad accuse his daughter of trying to be seductive in her dress. This reaction will bring about a predictable drop in self-esteem that can lead to a frantic search for redemption outside the home with peers, and often an increased probability for premature sexual involvement. What is needed is a reaffirmation of the daughter's attractiveness and feminine appeal, with the additional message that she can hold her own among her peers. There is a line out of the old classic movie, Casablanca, which captures dad's needed response perfectly. This is simply to give his daughter a wink and say, "Here's lookin' at you kid."

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Wilber, Ken. *Grace and Grit*. Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1991.

MOTHER AND SON RELATIONSHIP

The relationship between a mother and her son has supplied novelists and screenplay writers with subject material for many years. And as is often the case, fiction is based on situations that are true to life, which is why we can relate to them. The truth is, the relationship between mothers and their sons is a special one. Beginning in early childhood, a very strong bond is established in which the mother becomes the little boy's object of tremendous feelings of love and affection. She is the light of his life, so to speak. Later on, she becomes the model by which the young man chooses a girlfriend and eventually a wife. You'll recall the line from the song, "I want to marry a girl, just like the girl, that married dear old Dad." In fact, as many young men begin to seriously date, they often pick girls that look like their mothers and certainly that have personality similarities. In this way, they get to keep their mothers, yet move forward toward the fullness and complexity of the romantic relationship.

For mothers of young budding male teens, the relationship seems to undergo a metamorphosis. Brought on by the onset of puberty, this transformation is usually somewhat rocky and uncomfortable and can pose some real problems in successfully navigating it. Additionally, certain factors can make the process more difficult yet such as being a single mother, or not having an emotionally available father in the picture. Let me give you an example of a common occurrence in my practice, which should help in describing the problem. Mom calls me for an appointment due to some rather alarming behavior on the part of her son. We'll call him Sam. She reports he was formerly a good student (often excellent), they had always enjoyed a very close relationship, and she typified him as having been a "good boy." Now she reports he has changed to the degree that she feels she doesn't know him anymore. He is either nasty or aloof with only periodic flashes of his "old self." Furthermore, his grades and behavior have deteriorated at school. In her most desperate moments, she fears he has become involved in drugs or is hanging out with kids whom she labels as "a bad influence." Further investigation reveals the father is predictably out of the picture. What I mean by that is that he is either living separate from the family, works a great deal or is emotionally absent. More often than not, he has been that way for years. Mom will tell me she has had to be both mother and father to the boy and has no romantic interests to speak of. The mother and son have indeed meant a great deal to each other.

I suppose there are a great many causes we could cite in an effort to explain Sam's problems, but I would like to call your attention to what I believe lies at the heart of the matter - that is the boy's need for distance from his mother and the additional emotional need for closeness to an adult male. Let me elaborate. As boys move into puberty, they change quickly and profoundly. As described in the articles on early adolescence (see website listing), the young teen's body is flooded with hormones that change forever how he feels about himself and his relationships with others. Mothers who are dependent on their boys for affection, support or love, believe they are exempt from the changes taking place in their sons. They are not. The love, companionship and closeness that formerly comforted both of them has now been tainted by the young man's sexuality. He now sees his mom as trying to control him and as being prying and invasive. What brings him peace is not her love, but distance from her. He will obtain that distance any way he can. That includes verbalizing the desire to go live with a long despised and distant father, failing in school, outbursts of rage, drug use, and so on.

Now of course there is an additional point I want to draw to your attention. We have been talking for the most part about "single" mothers. You see, young men need to feel mom has another appropriate male to give her affections to, and he needs to also feel there is a man he can love and identify with while he gathers up his strength to begin that other mind boggling event known as dating. The presence of this father figure relieves him of the guilt boys feel as they leave their moms behind, and also gives them a role model for future relationships with women. Additionally, both mother and son need to feel free to experience the thought, "You are not who or what I thought you were." It represents a normal step through the life cycle to independence for all parties concerned. Mom must find an appropriate object for her love away from the boy and he must be encouraged to pursue appropriate young ladies.

The effort on the part of either mother or son to fight the change and maintain the relationship they used to have will only lead to arrested development and frustration. What mom needs to do is encourage efforts at independence on the part of her son and understand his ill temper is a very necessary phase of development. Both married and single moms will need to find avenues for expressing their affections and independence outside of their sons, thus allowing for

some natural distance to develop between them during this transformational phase. This should allow her more gratification while at the same time lifting the burden of guilt from her son who worries that mom cannot survive without him.

Allowing Negative Feelings

One of the more difficult aspects of being a parent is dealing with our children's negative feelings. There are a number of reasons why this is so, some of which come from our own experiences with parents and some out of a need to see our children happy. If you come from the old school of parenting, then you learned as a child that expressing your negative feelings such as anger, disappointment, sadness, frustration, and so forth, was a sign of weakness, or perhaps it signified that you were just being ill-mannered or self-centered. The old saying "If you don't stop crying, I'll give you something to cry about," captures one sort of attempt to suppress such feelings in children. Another approach is to ignore the negative outpouring while also bombarding the child with as many positive anecdotes as you can in an attempt to maybe cover up or overcome the situation. Yet another attempt is simply to fix the problem so that the negative feelings disappear. In each of these cases the end result is the same: the child senses that the expression of such feelings is not okay and that it would be best to try and suppress them. This can have far reaching effects not only for children, but also for adults who have successfully learned to suppress negative feelings. The problem is that emotional suppression usually leads to other deleterious effects on our overall functioning and happiness. By suppressing our negative feelings and reactions, we create holes in reality that leave us second-guessing ourselves and prevent us from knowing the full picture of who we are and what we can do. In other words, the suppression of negative feelings ultimately ties up our good feelings too so that we find ourselves operating in very tight, rigid boxes that constrict the total personality and leave us sometimes with inexplicable reactions such as depression or anxiety.

For parents, it is important to learn how to allow our children to express their negative feelings, and then to channel those feelings into positive activity. This is much more difficult than it may sound because what is required of parents is that they actually contain their children's pain at times without trying to get rid of it, suppress it, or simply by-pass it. It might help to begin by looking at how we go about suppressing negative feelings and reactions and then discussing a corrective method for allowing them. See if you can find yourself in any of the types that are discussed below.

THE FIX-IT APPROACH

The "fix-it" approach is aimed at taking away the child's pain as quickly as possible, almost before it can be felt. Let's say Suzie comes home from school and is very upset that several of her friends have been invited to spend the night at Joanna's house on Saturday, but Suzie wasn't invited. Mom reacts by whisking Suzie off to the mall and buying her several new outfits of her choice, and then maybe taking her out to lunch with a promise to have a slumber party of her own in several weeks. Suzie reacts well. Within no time at all she is smiling and looking forward to her slumber party. You might ask, "So what's wrong with offering a slumber party as an alternative here?" Well maybe nothing, however, the problem is that no time was given to Suzie to adequately feel and express her disappointment and hurt at being left out. Worse yet, Suzie is being taught a coping mechanism that will cause her problems down the road: When your feeling disappointed or unhappy, reward yourself - go shopping! There is nothing wrong in cheering up your disappointed child, but first it's important to let them have the experience of the disappointment, and then help them figure out the best way to cope with it. Moreover, the cure must be something that will have healthy long-term consequences, not create a new problem behavior or habit.

THE "JUST GET OVER IT" APPROACH

This one goes along with the "just put it behind you" approach. Going back to Suzie's situation, Mom might say, "Hey, everyone gets left out sometimes. Come on, just smile and shrug it off."

That doesn't really sound so bad. After all, it is true that everyone experiences rejection at some time or another, and it is something we all have to deal with sooner or later. The problem in this scenario, though, is that the feelings have not been dealt with at all, but rather the message imparted is to just get rid of them without giving them any attention whatsoever. Over time, children interpret the "just get over it" approach as a value judgement in which negative feelings, particularly those that cause emotional pain, are weak or silly and maybe even unacceptable. As the child practices "getting over it" quickly and succinctly, they may develop the even more dangerous habit of not allowing themselves to feel painful reactions at all, but to suppress them before they come to the surface. This is highly dangerous because it nullifies the capacity to listen to certain emotional warnings that are necessary to make healthy decisions. The young man who has learned not to feel rejection may plunge headlong into relationships where he is repeatedly rejected and trammeled upon because he can't access his own emotional warning system.

THE "CHILDREN ARE STARVING IN CHINA" APPROACH

This one might sound quite familiar to many of you as one your parents used quite often. Someone is always having a more difficult time than you are, and that translates to mean your feelings are not important in the larger scheme of things. Suzie's hurt feelings about being left out of the slumber party is nothing compared to the pain starving children feel. Well yes, that is true. But does that mean that Suzie shouldn't feel any pain at all at being left out? Yes, that's exactly the message Suzie is being given. "Your feelings really aren't important here, because others feel more pain than you do." It can be helpful to place one's own seemingly negative circumstances within the larger picture sometimes. It can allow us to draw ourselves out of a sort of wallowing, self-pitying pattern. However, we must first learn how to feel, express, and understand our own reactions before figuring out how best to cope with them. It's fine to help children gain a larger picture of humanity, and in fact it's a good idea. It's not a good idea to use that picture to mollify or belittle a child's emotional pain, no matter how trite it may seem to the adult. It's through the experience of our own emotionally painful experiences that we are able to understand and identify with the pain of others.

THE "MY PROBLEMS ARE BIGGER THAN YOURS" APPROACH

When Jeremy has a melt-down on the way home from school because he couldn't find a picture he drew that day in his backpack, it can feel like punishment after a long day at the office where you were criticized by your boss, saddled with too much work to do in too little time, and had to deal with gossipy co-workers that were taking stabs at each other. The most natural response to Jeremy would be to say something along the lines of "Knock it off. You don't know what trouble is!" And, of course you are right. He has no idea what it's like to be in your shoes. The difficulty here is that what's needed is to separate your stress from Jeremy's experience. By overpowering Jeremy's feelings with yours, you are communicating to him that his feelings are insignificant and not worthy of consideration. Parents who consistently meet their children's emotionally painful expressions with statements like "just wait until you're an adult," or "why don't you watch the news for ten minutes" are sending the message that such feelings should be suppressed and worse yet, not addressed.

A BETTER APPROACH

So how should parents deal with children's negative emotions and expressions? The first rule is to simply allow them to occur. This is not so easy. It means that parents must be able to endure the feeling expressed and at the same time encourage a thorough enough expression so that the child feels understood. In essence, what this means is that the parent plays the role of facilitator and container at the same time. You facilitate the expression of the emotion while also containing the feeling without any attempt to get rid of it, bypass it, or suppress it.

Let's take these two tasks one at a time. To facilitate the expression, the parent needs to draw out the feeling by asking leading questions, listening carefully to the responses, and reflecting back what is heard. Going back to Suzie in the early example, let's walk through the process. As Suzie comes in the door from school and tells you she is very upset, you would respond by asking questions about exactly what happened, how she learned that the other girls had

been invited to the friend's house, where was she when she heard about it, how did she feel when she heard about it, and what did she do next. Maybe she cried, or went to the bathroom so no one would see how she felt, and so forth. You want to get an almost visual picture of what happened while keeping very attuned to the development of feelings along the way. Maybe Suzie felt hurt at some points in the process, disappointed at others, and perhaps angry at being left behind. Help her elaborate not only the events, but also her feelings along the way and her emotional reactions. As she tells you what happened, reflect back to her what you think she is saying. It's like a check and balance to be sure that you understand what happened, how she felt, and as a result, can now really empathize with her.

That's the facilitation piece. Now for the containing piece. Actually, this takes place as you facilitate the conversation. By allowing Suzie to recount every facet of the events along with encouraging her to verbalize the emotional process that took place, you are communicating your ability to understand how she feels while also imparting your concern and caring. You are letting her know that you are able to sustain her painful feelings and are not afraid of them, angered by them, or unable to hear them. As she tells you about them, you are in fact emotionally containing them for her so that she can gain some space from them and some control over them. More importantly you are sending the message that life has its disappointments and that she is strong enough to endure them and work through them. How does she know this? Because you are containing and sharing her feelings in a way that shows strength and acceptance.

In some instances, the expression of the feelings are all that is required and necessary. In many cases, however, there is another step that follows which is to problem-solve. In Suzie's case, it would be important to find out if she has had other trouble with these particular friends. Or perhaps she needs to develop some other friendships if the girls in question have been routinely rejecting or cruel. It might also be that Suzie has contributed to the problem in some way, but has no awareness of it. A thorough examination of all the possibilities would help Suzie learn to analyze problems to see if there are ways she can resolve them. Having her own slumber party as mentioned above might be just fine once she has thoroughly worked through her hurt feelings and analyzed the situation to see if she has somehow contributed to it. Whatever the solution, the important thing is that you are allowing your child to have the experience of emotional disappointment, rejection, hurt, frustration, anger, or whatever the feeling or combination of feelings may be. Secondly, you are teaching her how to express these feelings verbally (as opposed to acting them out). Third, you are fostering self-examination and insight that will become invaluable as your child gets older. Finally, you are teaching your child how to channel negative feelings into positive actions through a process of problem solving.