Infancy and Childhood

The Significance of Peek-A-Boo

I was sitting in a local food court the other day having lunch when I spied a young toddler with his mother, sitting in his stroller while they were eating lunch. I caught his eye, and proceeded to cover my face with my hands for a moment and then suddenly open them up while delivering a big, smiley "peek-a-boo". He squealed with delight, waiting for me to do it again . . . and again . . . and again. Each time, the laughter was bigger, and the fascination greater as he watched my face disappear and then appear again.

Peek-a-boo is a favorite game for toddlers, and if a partner is willing, these youngsters can often continue the game for quite some time until some other distraction comes along. What is it about peek-a-boo that is so attractive at this age? The answer lies in the multi-functions this game serves in assisting young children in negotiating several major developmental tasks that are of primary importance during the first three years of life. These tasks are (1) "separation-individuation," and (2) the achievement of what's called "object constancy." Let's take these one at a time and look at how the "peek-a-boo" game provides a simple play mechanism that aids our young infant in the journey to become a separate, autonomous little person that is emotionally secure and ready to take on the next major steps in exploring the world.

SEPARATION-INDIVIDUATION

Separation-individuation is a developmental term that refers to the process by which an infant begins to differentiate himself from his mother (or the primary caretaker). This is both a bodily and psychological process that requires many new skills such as the ability to compare himself to others, to conceptualize, to perceive differences and likenesses, to remember, to display a variety of new emotions, and so forth. This acquisition of new skills, which allows the young child to begin to widen his perception of the way things actually are (perceive reality), ultimately leads him to the accomplishment of individuation - the emergence of a separate little "self" that can relate to the world and others from the young throne of autonomy. This process goes on over a period of about three to four years, and is one of the more wondrous phases of development for parents to witness and facilitate. Like the child's emergence from his mother's womb during the process of birth, separation-individuation is the "psychological birth of the human infant" (Mahler, 1975) during the early years of life. There are several steps, or subphases, in the process of separation-individuation that occur fairly chronologically, with some overlap as the child practices what he has learned. Generally, these steps are referred to as the differentiation phase, practicing phase, and rapprochement.

Differentiation Phase

This phase begins somewhere around four to five months of age. Up until that point, the young infant has enjoyed a very symbiotic relationship with her mother, which simply means that she has experienced her mother for the most part as simply an extension of herself. It's sort of an extended womb-like experience where all the needs of the infant are magically fulfilled when needed. Mother and child are not really different at this point for the infant. Fairly soon, however, the baby begins to discern mommy's face along with the sense of love and warmth that comes from her. We begin to see the infant smile at mommy in a way that shows some recognition and attachment, and signifies a special bond. Baby can now differentiate between her mommy and others in the environment. It takes her a little longer, however, to begin to differentiate between herself and mommy. We begin to see the initiation of the process of physical differentiation that is facilitated by baby's alternately molding her body toward her mommy's, and then distancing her body by arching away. Through movement while being held by mommy, the baby is allowed to get the first inklings of having some separation from mommy, however, this is still very tentative. Touch is the primary sensory activity that allows for this beginning differentiation process.

Around six months of age, the process of separation-individuation gets into full swing as differentiation takes on a more exploratory quality. Very simply, baby becomes fascinated with mommy's face as exemplified by pulling on her nose and ears, putting her hands into mommy's mouth, rearing away from her in order to get a better look at her, grabbing her hair, etc. Around this time, the game of peek-a-boo may emerge for the first time as mommy alternately hides her face and reappears for baby. Although baby is fascinated, peek-a-boo is experienced very passively by baby in that mommy does all of the work, and baby watches, not yet entering into the game except as observer.

Practicing Phase

The process of differentiation continues in this next phase, which is characterized by baby's newfound abilities to physically put distance between herself and mommy. At the seven to eight months, most babies begin pulling up on furniture, sitting upright, crawling, and scooting across the floor. All of these new motor skills allow baby to actually move away from mommy, which adds the new dimension of physical separation to the process of differentiation. Not only is mommy's face different than other's, but baby is different than mommy as can now be experienced by separation from mommy, if only for small distances. This newfound separation is wondrous, but also somewhat scary to the budding toddler, particularly when she gains the capacity to stand upright and walk. Walking signifies the hallmark of physical separation, and the accompanying increased differentiation that naturally occurs. It also presents another problem for the toddler who now finds herself alternately elated at her new skills and new vision of the world (from the upright position), and anxious during periods of distance from mommy which are somewhat frightening. Remember, this little person has come a long way, but emotionally she is not yet a fully individuated little self that is able to maintain the security of her mommy's love when away from her. She now has to learn to enjoy mommy from a distance, and to maintain that solid bond from afar. This is done simply by "practicing". Baby moves away from mommy, turns around and looks at her, gestures to her, makes sounds at her, and then runs back to her. Mommy serves as her "home base" - the place where baby can refuel by making physical contact and reestablishing that emotional bond before going back out into the world to explore. Stanley and Nancy Greenspan call this new kind of practicing communication "distal communication" (1985), which is characterized by the toddler's maintaining the feeling of attachment over distance through the use of gestures, voice, and eye contact. The toddler is literally practicing having mommy at a distance, while also practicing and mastering her new skills of locomotion and independence. Peek-a-boo takes on a very active quality during this phase. It allows the toddler to practice losing and regaining mommy over and over, similar to the practice of moving away from and back to mommy for refueling.

Rapprochement

The phase called rapprochement (Mahler, 1975) begins around 18 months of age, and signifies the infant's full status now as a toddler. As the toddler's physical capacities increase, allowing for greater distancing and locomotion, there is also an expansion of her cognitive capacities and need for more intimate emotional experiences. Whereas she was most interested in exploring the new world with mommy serving primarily as a home base and refueling station, she now moves her interests in the direction of social interaction. Instead of being primarily interested in the world of things, she has a new interest in personal exchange. Mommy takes on a new role, which is someone with whom the toddler can share her experience, and whom she can imitate and identify with. She brings mommy toys to play with and share; she darts away from her until mommy chases her and swoops her up in her arms; she imitates mommy's facial expressions, and mommy mirrors them back to her. The toddler again plays peek-a-boo, but in a much more elaborate fashion. She uses many more gestures and sounds and may extend the game to hide and seek. She is displaying her new awareness of mommy as having a separate existence that is both similar to and different than hers. Moreover, mommy has certain functions and desires, some of which are different than the toddler's, and some of which even oppose the toddler's desires. So begins the process of learning to see mommy as the one who gives and nurtures, and also the one who obstructs and inhibits. Mommy is both "good mommy" and "bad mommy". The clash of desires, along with the toddler's growing awareness of herself as a separate person, creates a good deal of separation anxiety and frustration for the toddler. This developmental jump is the basis of the so-called "terrible twos", which most parents know actually moves into the "terrible threes", at least for the first half of the third year. This brings us to the next big leap, which is "object constancy."

OBJECT CONSTANCY

Object constancy refers to the toddler's ability to maintain a sense of mommy even when she is not there. This is done in both a literal, physical sense, and then later in a more psychic, emotional way. The literal approach begins, as we have seen, during the practicing phase during which time the toddler is consumed with learning how to place more and more physical distance between she and mommy, while at the same time maintaining the safety and security of the emotional bond with her. The sense of security at this stage is facilitated primarily by touch, and in increasing amounts by gesturing, rudimentary language, and eye contact. Mommy (the object), is maintained in a constant way as long as the toddler has contact with her directly. As the toddler matures, and both her capacity for conceptualization and emotional maturity increase, she gains the ability to begin to internalize mommy in a sort of psychological (or emotional) way so that when she is not physically present, the toddler can still psychologically access a sense of mommy and the soothing qualities that she embodies. Here's the beauty of peek-a-boo: just as mommy disappears and reappears in the game of peek-a-boo, mommy now can literally disappear, but the toddler knows she still exists and will return. She can create mommy's image in her mind's eye, and with it all the memories of how mommy sounds, feels, smells, and interacts with her. She can feel the security of mommy's presence, while yet maintaining a separateness that is now her little "self." This image provides tranquility, but also a solid quality to the new personality that is now ready to take off into the world of dreams and imagination, where the world becomes an environment of expansion and possibility.

So, remember that when you play peek-a-boo with your toddler, you are not only providing some very enjoyable entertainment and interaction with her, you are actually aiding her in facilitating some of the most important developmental steps that lead to the foundation of the personality.

Greenspan, S. and Greenspan, N. T. *First Feelings*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.

Mahler, M.S., Pine, F., and Bergman, A. *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1975.

Getting Through the Terrible Twos

The "terrible twos" conjures up a picture of a raging toddler pitching a very loud tantrum in the seat of a shopping cart in the grocery store while his very distraught mother (or father) frantically tries to soothe or distract him (maybe shoving cookies in his mouth) as others look on disapprovingly with looks that say "Can't you control your child?" If you've been a parent of a young child, you have probably experienced something along these lines at some time or another when your child was in his second or third year. So what is it during this phase of development that seems to bring about such quick changes of mood accompanied by rather intensive emotional outbursts at the drop of a hat? Well, actually these outbursts are common during this phase, and signal the complexity of the fast growth the toddler is experiencing along with his difficulty at times in assimilating the new challenges with which he is confronted. In particular, there is one challenge that stands out above the others, and this is the growing need to develop a sense of independence while at the same time maintaining a close, loving bond with the parents.

The need for independence has come about as a result of the new skills and capacities your toddler has acquired as he enters his second year. During the first year of life, parents are primarily concerned with the comfort and happiness of their baby as a close attachment is formed that is facilitated by regular nurturing and loving contact. This is a mutual need-fulfilling situation that poses very little conflict between parent and child. As the second year begins, however, most children have acquired the ability to walk, allowing them to begin practicing moving short distances away from the parent, while still engaged through hearing and seeing mommy's voice and face and exchanging gestures with her that make baby feel secure with the distance. As the budding toddler moves toward eighteen months of age, his capacities have expanded significantly. He not only walks, he can run and move about with much greater agility, allowing for greater distances between he and mommy. His new cognitive capacities allow him to be able to begin solving problems such as figuring out how to climb up in the chair to get the toy that is sitting on top of the table. He is acquiring the ability to learn and use symbols, which means he is connecting words to objects. Instead of just pointing his hand toward the object he wants, he can now combine pointing with a word to indicate the object and as such, is able to better communicate to the parent his exact wishes.

In addition to these new cognitive skills, the toddler has a greatly expanded emotional life. He has a variety of new feelings, desires, and interests. There is the need to explore the world around him, to be assertive and independent, and to express his pleasure and delight in his newfound capacities and interactions. At the same time, he becomes angry and frustrated when his desires are thwarted by mommy and daddy who are now beginning to set limits upon his activities. This clash of wills between the toddler and his parents threaten his continued need for dependency and closeness, resulting in the addition of separation anxiety to the newer experience of negative emotions. The toddler finds himself in the position of alternating between the new joys of independent exploration, the continued need for closeness to mommy and daddy, and an increasing clash of desires and will, all of which serve to produce quick mood changes and sometimes intensive emotional outbursts as the toddler is unable to adequately satisfy these seemingly opposing needs at the same time.

It is the parents' job to assist the toddler with the negotiation of these different needs while also protecting him from his inability to rein in his emotions and desires when they lead him toward danger. Parents can and should delight and share in the toddlers new independence, yet must also set limits that help the toddler begin to develop some self-control while also integrating positive and negative emotions into a more whole and complex sense of self. The key is to provide a nurturing, secure backdrop upon which limits can be experienced and negotiated, along with the emotions they produce.

LIMIT-SETTING

The purpose of setting limits for toddlers is to help them organize their behavior and gain control over their emotions. We give the toddler boundaries so that he can explore the world with a sense of freedom without being in danger. Stanley Greenspan calls this establishing "behavioral fences," (from *Building Healthy Minds*, 1999). The key idea here is that limit setting is not the same as punishment, but rather a way of teaching the toddler to internalize self-control without squelching his independence.

How Is It Done?

By the time you need to set limits, you have already begun to establish a means of communicating with your toddler through gestures and cues. You will use this same methodology to set limits. By pointing your finger, changing the tone of your voice, and looking straight into your child's eyes while giving a strong "No," you will begin to attune the toddler to cues that tell him to inhibit his behavior. Let's take an example. Say your toddler goes over to the coffee table, picks up a magazine, and begins to tear the pages out of it. You have already shown him several times that he may look at the pictures, but must not tear them out of the book. This time, you get down on his level and look him firmly in the eye while gesturing (pointing forcefully) at the pages being torn out, and say with a slightly elevated voice, "No!" If he continues, you continue to elevate your voice and repeat the command. If he still doesn't respond as you wish, you then remove the magazine. Very likely this will result in the toddler's crying, or perhaps even wailing and screaming in frustration and anger. Now here's where the tricky part comes in. You do not at this point want to punish the toddler. You have already set the limit. What's more important now is to help him gain control of himself, and you do this by sympathizing with his feelings. After all, tearing the pages out of the magazine was fun! It made a fascinating sound and the toddler is upset at having his fun interrupted. You want to let him know that you understand how he feels. You might say something like, "It made you mad when I took away the magazine, didn't it?" All the while you are rubbing his back to soothe him. When he has sufficiently calmed down, you can reengage him in the activity of looking at the magazine while reinforcing that the pages cannot be removed.

What you have done is assisted the child in gaining some control over his emotions and behavior, while also allowing him to experience his very natural negative feelings. By this action, you are telling the toddler that his feelings are normal, but at the same time, there is a better way to handle them. What you don't want to do is inhibit the normal expression of negative emotions. Your first job is to help the toddler experience them (through sympathizing with and acknowledging them), and then to teach him more appropriate ways of expressing them such as through verbalization. You will notice that over time, particularly as the child moves into the third year, that you will have success at helping the child label the feelings with words, and that this very act of verbalization will assist him to more quickly diffuse the intensity of the feelings. Keep in mind that allowing your child to express feelings does not spoil him. It is only in not setting limits and teaching your toddler how to rein in his behavior and emotions that you spoil him.

Time-Out

Time-out has become the favorite all-American mode of trying to control behavior, however, it should be used in moderation with toddlers. If you have tried every thing else and decide time-out is necessary, you will need to make some allowances for how it is used with this age group. Remember that our toddler is struggling with both the need for independence and the need to maintain closeness with parents. If you feel you need to impose a time-out, it should be very short in duration and should take place in the same room where you are located. Children this age should not be separated from their parents in the course of limit setting. Instead of helping the child gain control of himself, you will increase his separation anxiety. Further, he will associate his negative display of emotions with emotional abandonment. The more your toddler is able to experience the combination of positive and negative

emotions within the presence of the same caring and nurturing adults, the more likely he will be to form a complete sense of self that smoothly integrates the positive and negative aspects of the personality.

As adults, we know that the hallmark of mental health is having the ability to access all of our tendencies, emotions, and thoughts, and then be able to channel them in ways that are productive and that promote our well being. It's when these various parts of ourselves are split off into categories that we run into to trouble. The second and third years of life are where these patterns are established. You are teaching your toddler that "angry me" and "loving me" are both part of the same person. First they see it in terms of "bad mommy" (mommy who won't let me tear that magazine), and "good mommy" (mommy who hugs me and tucks me in at night). These two mommies coexist within the singular person who is ultimately nurturing and provides a sense of love and security.

PLAY TIME

Limit setting must occur in equal amounts to play time, or time spent that is not conflictual. "Play" is the language of children, and for the toddler is a must. If you are not used to engaging in play, begin by simply making a large space on the floor that is perhaps gated off so there are no temptations in the way. Use simple toys or just regular items that are available such as pots and pans, blocks, dolls, etc. What you want to do is allow the toddler to be the boss. This means letting him lead the play and make the decisions. If he wants to bang on pots, then join in. Most endearing to all toddlers and young children are adults who are able to act silly. If you make funny faces and sounds, you'll find your toddler rolling over with laughter and telling you "Again, again!" Also, big body motions are popular - jumping, dancing around, skipping, etc. Avoid sitting for periods of time with educational type toys at this age. Looking at books is great, but be sure to balance this with more creative, free form play. Don't get too involved with trying to make complex stacks of blocks, or doing puzzles, etc. More likely, your toddler will build blocks and then knock them all down.

A regular rule of thumb regarding play time is that if your toddler is experiencing increasing tantrums, or seems more emotionally discontent than usual, then it means you need to add in more play time. Play time restores the bond of closeness that is threatened by the toddler's angry feelings, and also allows the toddler some very needed power to offset the loss of power experienced from limit setting. As your child gets older, he will be able to play for longer periods of time alone and thus soothe himself. But for now, you and he are partners. Enjoy it - it doesn't last forever!

Brazelton, T. B. *Toddlers and Parents: A Declaration of Independence*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1989.

Greenspan, S., with Lewis, N. B. *Building Healthy Minds*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

Hey Mommy, Watch This

Four-year-olds necessarily engage in a lot of showing off or what might clinically be termed "exhibitionism." They run fast, kick the ball hard, pretend to leap off tall buildings, and dance like angels. As if these weren't enough, they expand and exaggerate their capabilities by pretending to be superheroes that can overcome any obstacle using their special magical powers. What is going on here is that these youngsters are making a grand entrance into the world. Having successfully navigated the tasks of the first three years and emerged as walking, talking, feeling, and thinking little individuals, these youngsters are now ready to take the next step, which is to join the wider world of social connections and social roles. To make the transition, however, they need to be armed with a positive self-image and a lot of self esteem that can withstand the ups and downs of engaging with peers and dealing with adults other than their parents. They need some padding and protection as they take on more complicated relationships and try and live up to greater expectations. The padding comes in the shape of a rather inflated and exaggerated sense of themselves, which they develop in two ways. The first is through the consistent observation and affirmation of themselves by their parents. Stated another way, the young child formulates who he is through the admiring eyes of mommy and daddy. It would be sort of like looking into a mirror that could talk back to you and affirm for you what you see, like the wicked queen in Snow White who says, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all." The answer she's looking for is that she is the fairest of them all. The four-year-old is looking for that same answer, and it needs to come from mommy and daddy in the form of admiration, attention, and love.

The second method is through fantasy play, especially play where the youngster takes on the role of a superhero or character with superhuman powers. For example, Joey is a four-year-old boy who loves to play Superman. He has a full-sized Superman cape which he wears over his Superman pajamas (that look like the Superman suit), and red boots that he constructs by pulling red knee socks up over his cowboy boots. To complete the outfit he has an old suit jacket and horn-rimmed glasses (without the glass) that he wears over the Superman outfit when he's Clark Kent. A typical fantasy is to have his mother pretend that some bad guys are chasing her and scream for help. "Clark" swirls around while removing his clothes and emerges as Superman. With his cape flowing, he flies through air, rushes to his mother's side, and single handedly throws the bad guys into outer space. She makes many exclamations about how strong he is and how grateful she is that he saved her. He tips his head, says "thanks mamn," and flies off.

In the fantasy, Joey steps into the world as a contributing participant, but he does so by becoming someone who is very powerful and

admired - a superhero. His mother's participation in the fantasy assists him in validating this puffed up self-image, and even after the fantasy is over, these feelings stay with Joey for some time. What this story exemplifies is the fact that young children need to experience themselves this way initially as they begin to make their entrance into the social world. Moreover, the experience needs to be a repetitive one until the child's oversized self-image becomes steady. As the child gets older and begins to interact more in social settings such as school, this inflated self-image will gradually be transformed into a cooperative and contributing self that participates in the general activities of society. The little superhero will become the school student, baseball player, doll collector, ballet dancer, etc. But for now, take pleasure in your little exhibitionist and join in his quest for conquering the world through play and admiration. You'll be providing a psychological bridge to the future.

Children's Heroes and the Ego Ideal

Hero worship is a childhood development that begins to emerge toward the end of the preschool years and gets into full swing during middle childhood. The popularity of superheroes among elementary school children attests to this popular pastime. Even as adults we continue to have heroes, mentors, and role models that we aspire to or hold in somewhat elevated positions.

In more psychological terms, the worship of heroes reflects the development of what is called the "ego ideal." The ego ideal is a concept that originated with Freud and refers to an exalted image of what or who we would like to be. It is a concrete representation of our highest personal aspirations, values, and goals, and is very often embodied by figures in our direct environment. For example, the young boy who aspires to become a pro-basketball player may develop a strong desire to "be like Mike." He would wear the famous 23 jersey, practice shooting and dunking the ball, and perhaps even pick up mannerisms that he sees when Michael Jordan plays such as the famous "air travel" that he exhibits while shooting. In another example, a young teen may aspire to internalize the personality characteristics of his grandfather. He adopts his grandfather's work ethic, mannerisms and speech, ways of dealing with people, business acumen, love of sports, or what have you.

In both cases the revered ideal is imitated, but in the latter situation there is also a process of identification that signifies the real work of the ego ideal. This will become clearer as we explore it in greater detail. Let's begin by taking a look at the functions served by the development of the ego ideal, and then discuss what parents can learn from exploring this concept with their children. Following, we'll offer an exercise that assists children in creating and exploring their ego ideal in such a way as to enhance their continued development and make healthy links to their communities.

PURPOSE OF THE EGO IDEAL

The emergence of the ego ideal is an important and necessary development during childhood. Around the age of three to four when the child has successfully developed a sense of self that is separate from the parents, there comes with it an automatic and growing awareness of his or her dependency and inferiority in comparison with the abilities, maturity, and even physical stature of the parents. In other words, as young children emerge as individual selves, they also become aware of their smallness and underdevelopment in the hierarchy of human beings. They simply cannot do what adults can do, or what older siblings can do. Along with that awareness, a desire to reach forward and upward develops. It is this awareness and desire that naturally pushes children to develop and expand, to master developmental tasks, and to move on to the next set of challenges after reaching each goal. The ego ideal comes to represent the child's desire to develop and to become more and better. It is an image of the goal.

The original ego ideal is usually a parent since the younger child's early development is fostered mostly through his or her relationship with the parents. As the child gets older, however, he or she begins to aspire to other models that embody some characteristic or set of characteristics that are deemed to be valuable and necessary. The popularity of biographies among elementary school children is one way this fascination with the ego ideal manifests itself. Other representations are the continual interest and focus on figures in the spotlight such as musicians, entertainers, or sports figures. Someone's ego ideal may by the current gold medallist in figure skating, a music video star, or a popular movie icon. It could also be an historical figure such as a president, or a religious figure like Mother Teresa. Older teens and even young adults may find their ego ideals in writers, philosophers, and social leaders such as Martin Luther King or Mahatma Ghandi. Even older adults have ego ideals such as these. Role models closer to home may be people that live within the child's or teen's immediate environment such as family members, friends, teachers, coaches, and so forth. Moreover, the ego ideal will change as children move through various stages of development. As the child matures, the ego ideal will become more realistic in terms of offering functional qualities than can be incorporated into one's life.

WHAT PARENTS LEARN FROM THE EGO IDEAL

So the question is "How is the concept of the ego ideal important for parents in raising their children?" For starters, parents can find out a lot about how their children see themselves as well as what they value by discussing with them who their ego ideals are and what they are like. Secondly, the ego ideal provides children a way to stretch their development forward in ways that assist them to find a place within their social environment that both makes use of and shapes their raw talents. By discussing with children who their ego ideals are, parents help them forge a goal or series of goals they can strive for in a way that captures their imagination and interest. Playing basketball is a lot of fun, but trying to incorporate the perseverance and practice strategies of someone like Michael Jordan provides a way to reach toward a goal, while offering an image of what is possible. Finally, exploring the ego ideal assists children with moving from fantasy toward reality as they move through each of their developmental tasks. The ego ideal, which initially begins with fantastic figures such as superheroes, is modified over time into a representation of someone who is real and who embodies more complex and reality oriented values and characteristics. Aspiring toward the compassion, intellect, bravery, or creativity of real people offers children a way to not only imitate the ego ideal, but to make a real identification that results in the development of the same qualities within the child.

The last point is important because it underscores a problem that can occur when children and adolescents aspire toward an ego ideal that is either beyond their reach or that embodies characteristics that are unrealistic or psychologically dangerous. A good example might be the young girl who focuses a great deal of attention and energy toward looking and acting like a supermodel. The ego ideal in this case is probably not realistic, and further is rather one-dimensional with most of the attention centered around narcissistic pursuits like how one looks. Strong attempts to imitate such a role model taken to the extreme could result in unhealthy dieting, precocious sexuality, and ultimately feelings of inferiority when the ideal remains out of reach. Even more harmful are ego ideals that exemplify antisocial behavior such as gangsta rap stars or substance abusing rock stars. The problems are obvious here and reflect unhealthy trends in the child's individual development that ultimately may lead to self-destructive activity. Healthier ego ideals will incorporate pro-social internal human qualities that expand one's potentialities from the inside out, and with which one can make a real identification as these qualities are internalized as one's own. By examining our children's ego ideals, we can head off unhealthy pursuits while at the same time encourage and enhance those personality developments that utilize natural talents and help our children to find a productive niche in the larger community.

EXPLORING THE EGO IDEAL

To help your children make the most of this developmental aid, and to find out more about his or her values and aspirations, we suggest the following activity. This activity works best with children ages 7 and up, and is adaptable for teens. It can be done between parent and child as well as in the classroom setting.

- Announce to your child (class if you're a teacher) that you are going to engage in a short activity that should take about 45 minutes to an hour, and more if you like. Have paper and pencil (or a chalkboard), along with art materials and magazines available.

- Introduce the subject by telling your child that you are going to fill up a large piece of paper or poster board with everything that represents who they want to be or be like. Explain that they may use people they know, people they know about (like sports figures), or any pictorial representation they can find in the magazines that express some particular quality or talent. For example, a picture of ballet shoes might fit in with the desire to be a dancer.

- As the activity progresses, your job is to facilitate the most detailed composite that can be constructed. In other words, ask a lot of questions to help the child refine every part of the ego ideal. What kinds of characteristics do they have? What are their talents? What are their values? How do they treat other people? What kind of families or friends do they have? How did they get to be who they are?

- If the child focuses mostly on people that are not accessible like superheroes, draw their attention toward people within their environment. Ask questions like "Is there anyone you know that you would like be like? Then follow these answers up with

"Why?" or "What is it that you like about that person?"

- Embellish the project with stories about the people selected. This helps the child to expand the desired qualities into real life situations.

- The next step is have the child think about how they might get there. How might the specific characteristics or qualities that stand out be internalized or expressed? This initiates the process of identification and helps the child think about the realistic steps that lie between the wish and desired fantasy. This doesn't mean trying to become the ego ideal, but rather making a solid identification with some of the important aspects of the ideal. For example, if Abraham Lincoln is the role model chosen, the task would be to pinpoint what qualities he represents or stands for and then talk about how to identify with these. In this case it might be that the desired qualities are leadership, fairness, honesty, and so forth. That being the case, who else might the child know that embodies these qualities and how do you cultivate them.

- When the project is completed, you can hang the finished product on the wall and revisit it at another time when the ego ideal has changed and a new or enhanced image needs to be constructed. Obviously, for older teens a discussion would work quite well without the added visual aid unless it is something they would like to do. Either way, you will find out a lot about your children as well as help them in their quest for an identity.

Note: The "ego ideal" is not to be confused with the more misguided desire of wishing to be like someone else because we are highly self-critical and unhappy with who we are. The ego ideal should not engender feelings of jealousy or envy or self-criticism, but rather possibility, admiration and expansion. Happy hunting!