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LEARNING HOW TO ACCEPT YOUR CHILD

A parent cannot communicate acceptance to their child if there are parts of their spouse, their parents or their siblings which they reject that get manifested by their child. When their child acts in ways which remind the parent of the disliked, rejected parts of their spouse, their parents or their siblings, the parent will be activated to respond with the same negative emotions, attitudes, words and actions which were elicited years earlier by family members or currently by their spouse.

Maria was raised by a dogmatic Italian father and a very loving but very anxious mother. Dad yelled a lot but seemed very strong and powerful. Mom was very appealing but drove Maria crazy with her fearfulness. Maria identified with her opinionated and somewhat loud, even bullying father, and loved but was often exasperated by her anxious mother. When Maria consulted me, her eldest daughter and she were at loggerheads a great deal of the time. Detailed analysis of patterns revealed that Maria responded to her daughter in ways quite similar to the ways she responded to her mother. When her daughter, Francesca, would get fearful, anxious, or worried, Maria would chide her for being “too fearful.” Maria would then, without even noticing, emotionally withdraw from her. Francesca felt discounted and rejected, even though Maria loved her dearly. Maria simply couldn’t see that her daughter was triggering negative, critical and discounting responses in her that she had used as a child to avoid becoming overwhelmed with her own mother’s extreme fearfulness.

However, sometimes the problem is not that our child reminds us of a parent, a sibling or our marital partner. Sometimes the problem is even closer to home. Our child may stir feelings we have towards “negative” or rejected, “bad” parts of

ourselves. **When our child reminds us of the worst parts of ourselves, it is clearly time to start with addressing ourselves.** But how do we go about doing this?

Essentially, we must come to understand how we came to be the way we now dislike or reject. We must then make our peace with our having developed these characteristics which we dislike and reject.

Whether our child stimulates feelings we had about our parents, siblings, or spouse, or stirs up feelings we currently have about ourselves, we are left with the same problem – what do we do to fix this so we can accept our child better?

We must do the same thing we would do to achieve our own self-acceptance. **We make every effort to understand how our child got to be the way he or she is.** *“Does my child, through no fault of his own, have the same shy temperament as his father?” “Does my child, through no fault of his own, have the same over-anxious personality as my mother?” “Did my child learn to be bullying to his sister from being bullied by his older brother?” “Is my child rolling his eyes at me because he has seen his father express disdain for me countless times?” “Is my child really a bad child, as I fear, or has he been given, through genetics or through modeling, aspects of his extended family which cause me pain?”*

Regardless of the source of my child’s agitating and troubling behavior, I love my child and want my child to grow up in a strong and healthy way. **It is my job to help my child outgrow negative habits and to modify negative characteristics.** I should **start with understanding** how my child developed the patterns and characteristics they now exhibit. I then **move to removing blame.** *“How can I blame a child for living the genetic or family relationship blueprint he was handed?”* In place of blame, I **develop compassion.** I may start out feeling angry, critical or rejecting of the way a child is or has acted, but hopefully I soon

feel more and more understanding and compassion for this child whose life will have too much suffering and perhaps even self-hatred if I do not help him or her to change by developing better approaches to living. I definitely want my child to grow, but **I want them to change and grow because I love them and have compassion for them, rather than because I am angry with them and can't stand being around them.**

Please trust me on this: **children know if you are encouraging them to change because you dislike them** and want to get rid of the bad feelings you have when they act badly. They may change behaviorally, but they may also develop self-hatred.

They also know when you are “on their side” in wanting to help them make their lives and their relationships work out better. As my wife Marilyn constantly exhorts the parents of her child patients in psychotherapy: *“Help them change, but always do this in a way in which they know you are on their side. Always communicate with them in a way that they know that you have joined their team.”*

It's time now to conclude this discussion of acceptance by examining **how to communicate with your child in ways that feel accepting to them**, rather than discounting of them.

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