

## *Parenting in Recovery: Recognizing Legacies from the Past* *by Dr. Pam Monday*

Parenting your children once you are in your own recovery is one of the most difficult challenges you will face. Few of us bring home a parenting manual along with the diapers when the baby and we leave the hospital, and unfortunately, parenting, like conflict resolution, isn't usually taught in school. If you are in recovery, taking a parenting class or reading a parenting book is the minimum you should do to prepare yourself to be an adequate parent. Otherwise, you will just be making it up as you go along, a terrible way to prepare for what will be the most important job you will ever have. But even if you take a parenting class, and learn how to set limits, apply consequences instead of punishment, model respectful and appropriate behavior, etc., your children will still be at serious risk of learning unhealthy patterns from your parenting unless you are aware of and directly address the legacies you have inherited from your family-of-origin.

The family is the social system we are exposed to for the longest period of time, and is a primary source of information about human interaction. As children, we are consciously absorbing information about how to relate to others. We learn in families how to treat each other; what it means to be a man or a woman; how males and females are supposed to act; what marriage means; how parents treat children. We learn what is okay or not okay to feel, say and do. We learn coping mechanisms to deal with problems, and we learn to ignore or pay attention to information, depending on what is reinforced in our families. We learn these things even if no one is overtly talking to us about them. If you are a parent and in recovery, you will pass on many of the values, beliefs, attitudes and interactional patterns that you learned in your family of origin unless you take the time and energy necessary to recognize and understand those patterns. A 12-step program alone is not sufficient to change patterns of relating between parent and child that have been perpetuated in your family for generations.

If you find yourself questioning how powerful unconscious learning is, ask yourself if you have ever heard yourself saying something to your children that sounds just like something your own mother or father would have said, even when you swore never to be like them! It is as though the exact words and mannerisms that were modeled for us over and over by our parents are imprinted on our psyches, just waiting to be acted out!

When we have children, all our unresolved issues with our own parents surface. Life gets complicated quickly, because suddenly we are in the position to being both children and

parents. At some level, whether consciously or unconsciously, we sense there is more to life than we previously knew, and we are in a position of being able to understand what it means to be responsible for the life of another human being. This can be very frightening, particularly if our parenting role models were not very good ones.

Many people in recovery who have experienced abusive parenting have the attitude that they will parent their children exactly the opposite from the way they were parented. The problem with this approach, of course, is that extremes of parenting are passed down the family tree, with every other generation doing the opposite of what was done to them, and consequently, the individuals in every other generation look alike! For example, one generation will be abusive and controlling; their children will then raise the next generation in a very permissive environment; these children in turn will grow up without limits, will become willful tyrants and will control and abuse their own children. This is parenting in reaction to unresolved issues with one's own parents, rather than proactive parenting based on making informed, thoughtful choices about appropriate parenting behaviors.

There are several common unconscious patterns of interactions between parent and child that often show up in how we parent our own children, and these patterns are reinforced by the rules and myths around parenting that all families have. For example, one of the most severely damaging myths of parenting that has been perpetuated in our culture is "children owe their parents." This myth, originating as a loyalty bond that ensured the survival of clans, has been so distorted by culture and religion that today, even the most abusive parenting actions are often justified or ignored by our culture, and thus continue to be perpetuated in a virtual epidemic of child abuse.

For example, we may expect our children to "make us happy," as though they owe us for bringing them into being. We take their normal childish egocentricity personally, blaming them for making our lives so difficult. Feeling resentful, we then are caught up in blame-and-criticize posture, justifying our own behavior by saying, "that kid makes my life hell; he deserves to be treated harshly."

The problem with believing "children owe their parents" is that it is OUR job as parent to provide for our children's survival, growth and nurturing and to help them learn to relate to others. In turn, our children, when they become parents, pass this on to their own children. Unfortunately, if our own parents exploited us, and did not provide for the "stuff" of responsible parenting, we may look to our children to make up for what we did not get.

Thus, we collect the "debt" from our children, when in reality the debt belongs to a previous generation.

A surefire way to ensure the passing down of dysfunctional parenting patterns is to deny that we have wounds from childhood. In our denial, we will probably parent just like our parents. We will pattern our behavior like theirs, because we really feel they know what they were doing. (Of course, they never had the benefit of parenting classes, or current research about what produces healthy well-adjusted, emotionally stable people with high self-esteem, but we will not think of that.) We won't know that much of what was seen as "normal" when we were raised (such as "spare the rod, spoil the child," or "kids are responsible for their parents' happiness," or "they deserve punishment when they act up," or "crying means your a sissy," etc.) is destructive; after all, we tell ourselves, we turned out okay, right? Right.

Besides the obvious destructive interactions of physical or emotional abuse, there are many parent/child interactions that guarantee negative outcomes for the child. Ask yourself whether any of those patterns were present in your family of origin:

Was there a favorite child? Was a child scapegoated/labeled the "bad kid"? Did mom have her favorite kid, and did Dad have his favorite? Did any of the kids repeatedly defend the actions of one parent to the other siblings? Was anyone adopted? Did a child have the job of taking care of one or both parents? Was there incest anywhere in your family? Were there any premature deaths?

Looking now to your nuclear family (the one in which you are raising your own children), ask these questions: Have you frequently looked to your children to nurture you, to "make you feel better," to provide emotional support or to give you what would more appropriately be expected from a mate? Have you expected your children to be more responsible than you are, by modeling irresponsible behavior while at the same time expecting them to do it "right"? Have you expected your children to excel or to be perfect to make you look good? Have you not taken responsibility for your own behavior, instead of justifying your actions by blaming your child or spouse? Have you, when your marriage was in trouble, confided in a child your problems, so that the child felt the need to take sides with one parent or the other? Have you and your spouse focused on your children in an effort to avoid looking at problems in your marriage? Are your children having behavioral or emotional problems?

If you answered "yes" to any of the above questions, chances are good that you are reenacting some patterns of relating to your children that have been present in your family for generations. As human beings, it is scary to admit we don't know everything; it is scary to be responsible for raising another human being; it is scary to do the best we can, knowing we will still make mistakes, and will still wound our children in ways we might not even be able to predict.

But we, the recovering community, can be role models for the massive numbers in our culture who are still in denial. Our children will have a better chance than any other generation before us to be emotionally healthy with high self-esteem if we will do the following:

- 1) Learn and practice parenting skills.
- 2) Apologize to your children as soon as you realize you have made a parenting mistake, and demonstrate by your behavior that you are learning and growing.
- 3) Have the courage to look at your family patterns by being in therapy, reading books, attending classes - anything that requires you to grow and learn.
- 4) Learn communication and conflict resolution skills so that all of your relationships are more mutually satisfying.
- 5) Heal your relationship with an ex-spouse so that your children do not suffer from your unresolved issues with each other.
- 6) Actively work out your relationship with your partner to resolve old hurts and to model for your children mutually respectful, loving parental partnerships.

The most important thing you can do to break the transgenerational transmission of dysfunctional parenting patterns is to actively work on resolving issues with your parents, dead or alive. Resolution means that you are at peace with your relationship with your parents. This may mean that you have learned how to set limits with them, rather than trying to avoid them, and you are no longer giving them the power to intimidate you to try to control your life. To "divorce" your family by cutting off contact virtually ensures that unresolved issues will be acted out in the next generation.

If you feel you have no other alternative but to cut off from them, it is vital that you do the work of forgiveness. That does not mean that you condone any abusive acts. Forgiveness is the spiritual work of letting go of past hurts, anger, resentment and other negative emotions that are preventing you from living a joyous, full life in the present. To forgive is to find inner peace; parenting from a place of inner peace is the greatest gift you can give your child.