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FAMILY STRESS AND SELF-ESTEEM

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The family, not the judicial or educational systems, or any social or government entity, is the best agent for nurturing children and enhancing the self-esteem of today's youth. Unfortunately, the family is often unable or unwilling to meet this task. Society continues to change, and in the process many longstanding values disappear, leaving the family with less direction and unity as a social entity. The changing structure and function of the family is reflected in the various labels associated with this social unit, including "dysfunctional," "reconstructed," "non-traditional" and "blended."

Over the past twenty years, society raised a generation of physically, mentally and often morally underdeveloped children. This generation of youth remains plagued by high rates of malnourishment, obesity, academic failure, teen pregnancy, infant mortality, sex and drug related diseases, drug and alcohol abuse, gang activity, homicide, suicide, violent crime and low levels of competence and confidence. Accompanying these factors is the chronically negative self-concept possessed by many members of this generation of youth.

Jerome B. Dusek defined self-concept as "[o]ne's perception of the self" and self-esteem as an "evaluation, from positive to negative of the self-concept."¹ William Watson Purkey stated that "self-concept is a complex, continuously active system of subjective beliefs about one's personal existence. [Self-concept] serves to guide behavior and it enables the individual to assume a particular role or stance in life."² Many determinants influence the self-concept, including family structure, social class, maturation and cognitive competence. Purkey identified the family as exerting the greatest influence on the manner in which children perceive themselves and their abilities.³ Furthermore, Dusek's summary of the available research clearly indicates that child-rearing techniques, family composition, and parent-child identification or relationships are crucial to the adequate development of self-concept.⁴

Many family characteristics are associated with children who possess low self-esteem. Among these characteristics of the family are: (1) a reconstructed or blended family structure; (2) an insufficient income; (3) protected class membership; (4) poor or strained family relationships;

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1. JEROME B. DUSEK, *ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT AND BEHAVIOR* 168 (2d ed. 1991).
2. WILLIAM WATSON PURKEY, *INVITING SCHOOL SUCCESS: A SELF-CONCEPT APPROACH TO TEACHING AND LEARNING* 30 (1978).

3. *Id.* at 28.

4. DUSEK, *supra* note 1, at 156-61.

and (5) parents who are unemployed, teenaged, overindulgent, overly-strict, divorced, separated or single.⁵ Children's low self-esteem is usually attributed to the complex interaction of several factors and not the impact of a single factor. For example, an unfavorable family structure alone does not cause low self-esteem, but this factor may contribute to low self-esteem especially when accompanied by other factors including poor family relationships and overly strict parenting.

Low self-esteem is identified more with the quality of experience in the home environment than it is associated with the structure of the family.⁶ For instance, some studies found that children from single-parent households possess a level of self-esteem equivalent to those of two-parent households, and self-esteem in both family structures is negatively affected by disharmony in the home.⁷

Schools also play an important role in self-concept development through their programs, policies, personnel and processes. Much attention is focused on the significant relationship of teachers' attitudes and behaviors to the students' self-concept. For example, when teachers view their students as valuable, capable and responsible, and treat the pupils accordingly, they encourage the development of positive self-concept.⁸ Unfortunately, a great number of students, especially those who are "at-risk" or differ from the cultural norm, languish in the classrooms of disinviting teachers who do not believe these students hold the capacity or motivation to learn. These teachers even doubt their own ability to make a difference with such students because they believe the environmental and emotional problems cannot be overcome.

Children and youth are labeled as "at-risk" because they are unable to cope with stress without turning to drugs, sex, gangs, suicide, delinquency or other failings. At-risk children lack a belief in the efficacy of their families and themselves. A disproportionate number of these students differ from the cultural norm and are thus described as "culturally different."

Culturally different and poor children are often evaluated and educated using a deficit model. The deficit model assumes that children are less likely to succeed because they are inferior and may lack money, status, a complete family, legitimacy, intelligence or motivation. This is not a real model, but a mind-set based upon cultural, racial or economic inferiority, which has given rise to such terms as "disadvantaged," "culturally deprived" and "underprivileged."

In their book, William Watson Purkey and John M. Novak stressed the importance of perceiving children as valuable, capable and responsi-

5. See generally DUSEK, *supra* note 1; PURKEY, *supra* note 2; Lawrence A. Kurdek & Ronald J. Sinclair, *Adjustment of Young Adolescents in Two-Parent Nuclear, Stepfather, and Mother-Custody Families*, 56 J. CONSULTING & CLINICAL PSYCH. 91 (1988); Barbara H. Long, *Parental Discord vs Family Structure: Effects of Divorce on the Self-Esteem of Daughters*, 15 J. YOUTH & ADOLESCENCE 19 (1986).

6. DUSEK, *supra* note 1, at 300.

7. Kurdek & Sinclair, *supra* note 5, at 91; Long, *supra* note 5, at 19.

8. See PURKEY, *supra* note 2, at 27-28.

ble. They also emphasized the necessity of sending youth intentional messages confirming positive expectations and inviting children to view themselves and their circumstances in positive ways.⁹ Since perceptions develop from experience within a particular environment, it seems important to focus more on improving the quality of children's experiences in their various life environments than to denounce those environments because they are characterized as single-parent, poor, blended or culturally different.

Families are bombarded with economic, social, educational, and physical and mental health concerns that contribute to their demise. One scenario may involve an impending divorce, which is an open and constant topic, creating an unstable and hostile environment where children may either repeatedly witness, or be victimized in, verbally abusive and violent episodes. Another scenario may be characterized by the lack of money or employment, causing an unemployed, frustrated father to abuse or desert his family or an emotionally distraught mother to neglect or abuse her children. A third scenario may involve an employed single parent and the difficulty he or she faces in securing adequate childcare, resulting in inappropriate arrangements such as underage children caring for themselves and other siblings. Although each scenario could end with the dissolution of the family unit, there are remedies that may be utilized to avoid dissolution. One common remedy utilized to save the family from disintegration is the removal of the children from the home for placement in foster or protective care. Such an arrangement endures until the court is convinced that the natural parents are willing and able to provide a safe and nurturing environment.

The plight of the American family cannot be ignored, nor can society minimize the deleterious effects of the various conditions the family has endured. The circumstances contributing to the breakdown of the family include, but are not limited to: (1) a skyrocketing divorce rate; (2) a rising number of single-parent households; (3) increasing unemployment and poverty; (4) ever-changing gender roles; and (5) an increasing incidence of women in the work force. To this list, T. Berry Brazelton adds the following factors that place stress on the family unit: (1) households comprised of two working parents; (2) the disappearance of the extended family; (3) unclear cultural values; (4) inadequate surrogate care; and (5) a poorly defined support system.¹⁰

The plight of the family is magnified by the impact of these factors on African-American families. One report cites an alarming increase in the following African-American family characteristics: (1) young, poor and uneducated mothers; (2) absent fathers; (3) high infant mortality rates; (3) abused and malnourished children; and (4) a lack of loving

9. WILLIAM WATSON PURKEY & JOHN M. NOVAK, *INVITING SCHOOL SUCCESS: A SELF-CONCEPT APPROACH TO TEACHING AND LEARNING* 96-98 (2d ed. 1991).

10. T. Berry Brazelton, *Stress for Families Today*, 9 *INFANT MENTAL HEALTH JOURNAL* 65, 65 (1988).

discipline and standards.¹¹ The family unit is at risk of dissolving as these characteristics continue to pervade our society.

John S. Wodarski and Pamela Harris state that growing up today is not like maturing in the 1960s.¹² These researchers characterized that period as one in which most children enjoyed relatively caring families, a stable school environment and trusting adults in their lives.¹³ The authors also assert that today's youth must cope with daily fears about their uncertain futures and feelings of alienation.¹⁴ For instance, it is not uncommon for young urban children to fear molestation, abduction or murder, especially when youth are prematurely exposed to drugs and sex by uncaring and abusive adults.¹⁵

Certain family characteristics are associated with children and adolescents who are particularly susceptible to unwanted pregnancy, suicide, abuse, dropping-out of school and low self-esteem. These characteristics include: (1) family structure; (2) education; (3) income and employment; (4) race or culture; (5) family relationships; and (6) the parents' age and marital status.

Some studies focused on family characteristics and situations in which adolescents dropped out of school, while others addressed suicide and teen pregnancy. One study found a relationship between academic failure and family poverty, working mothers, single parenting and the level of education attained by adult family members.¹⁶ Another study explored family relationships and suicide and found that experiences in non-supportive and overly hostile environments, as well as a lack of empathetic communication, contributed to the development of suicidal personality characteristics.¹⁷ Furthermore, parental discord and intentional separations from the child were related to the incidence of adolescent suicide.¹⁸ A recent study associated teen pregnancy with family conflict and a deficiency of love in the family relationship, finding that pregnant teens held lower self-esteem and experienced feelings of worthlessness to a greater extent than their non-pregnant peers.¹⁹ The study noted that pregnant teens attempted to use their pregnancy to influence their parents, eliminate feelings of isolation and loneliness,

11. See generally BLACK CHILD IN CRISIS (William E. Cote ed., 1987).

12. See generally John S. Wodarski & Pamela Harris, *Adolescent Suicide: A Review of Influences and the Means for Prevention*, 32 SOCIAL WORK 477 (1987).

13. *Id.*

14. *Id.*

15. See generally ALEX KOTLOWITZ, *THERE ARE NO CHILDREN HERE: THE STORY OF TWO BOYS GROWING UP IN THE OTHER AMERICA* (1991) (presenting a biographical account of the deplorable circumstances in which urban families live and the fears that the children in these families experience).

16. Roy M. Gabriel & Patricia S. Anderson, *Identifying At-Risk Youth in the Northwest States: A Regional Database*, Report No. CG019889 (1987), available in ERIC Document Reproduction Service, No. ED282125.

17. Wodarski & Harris, *supra* note 12, at 477.

18. *Id.*

19. See Alice Sterling Honig, *Developmental Effects on Children of Pregnant Adolescents*, Report No. PS012861 (1980), available in ERIC Document Reproduction Services, No. ED217969.

and gain attention.²⁰ The study also found that teenage parents were often impatient, insensitive and irritable.²¹ Teenage parents held unrealistic expectations of their child's development, which often resulted in physical punishment of the child.²² While each of the studies found significant relationships between these variables, it is important to recognize that the presence of one or more factors in an individual's life does not necessarily lead to manifestations of at-risk behavior.

The role of the family in the development of positive self-esteem is clearly established. Moreover, the need to involve parents in this development is evidenced by the studies discussed above and informal observations made by parents and teachers regarding the present status of our children and youth. The remaining question concerns the method of furthering parental involvement in developing children's self-esteem.

Some qualities and parental behaviors that seem to promote positive self-esteem in children include: (1) mutual respect between parents and children; (2) parents according dignity to their children; (3) parents serving as positive adult role models for their children; and (4) parents providing a home atmosphere that is conducive to the growth and normal development of all family members.²³

Jackie Patterson stated these qualities in a slightly different way when she outlined four conditions necessary for the development of positive self-esteem. Those conditions involve: (1) connectiveness, which essentially equates to a sense of belonging; (2) models, which indicate some form of guidance, values and morals; (3) uniqueness, which provides a perception of positive self-worth and identity; and (4) power, which establishes areas of self-governance and control.²⁴

William Purkey and John Novak concluded that positive self-esteem is most likely to develop in a friendly, optimistic, respectful and caring atmosphere.²⁵ These educators assert that positive family relationships are characterized by: (1) respect for individual uniqueness, emphasizing the importance of relating to children as individuals who bring different qualities and abilities to the family group setting; (2) cooperative spirit, emphasizing the importance of working cooperatively for the benefit of all family members while avoiding unnecessary competitive practices; (3) sense of belonging, stressing the relevance of creating a caring environment and developing significant relationships to promote feelings of unity and self-efficacy; (4) pleasing habitat, emphasizing the relevance of providing a clean, safe and attractive environment for all family members to enjoy; and (5) positive expectations, conveying the importance of possessing positive beliefs about the potential success of each family member.²⁶ The consistent and reliable presence of these functional

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.*

23. See generally DUSEK, *supra* note 1.

24. Videotaped presentation at Alverno College, Milwaukee, Wis. (Spring, 1989).

25. See PURKEY & NOVAK, *supra* note 9, at 27-28.

26. *Id.*

family characteristics creates beneficial environments and relationships and invites positive self-esteem.

Building upon these concepts, I suggested to parents that they invite positive self-esteem by: (1) not trying to clone their brightest, most social, athletic, musical or otherwise talented child, but allowing each child to develop his or her own strength; (2) not placing children in competition with each other, but rewarding them for working cooperatively for the general good; (3) not decorating their homes like museums where children are not allowed to enter certain rooms or sit on the furniture, but allowing the house to reflect the fact that children are an integral part of the family and providing a happy, wholesome atmosphere; (4) not holding inappropriately high expectations of children, but gearing expectations to their abilities; and (5) not spoiling children and granting their every wish to prove your love, but providing parameters, guidance, continuity, warmth and genuine love.²⁷

Norma and Gene Leach and Pat Schroeder compiled a tip sheet for parents and suggested that parents could enhance their children's self-esteem by creating a homelife fostering acceptance, trust, concern and love among all family members. Among the seventeen tips were: (1) provide consistent rules for behavior; (2) hold realistic expectations for your children; (3) spend at least fifteen minutes conversing daily with your children; (4) display your child's good work; and (5) help children develop responsibility by assigning chores.²⁸ All of these tips appeared in one form or another in popular magazines, books and pamphlets on self-esteem, workshop materials for parents and teachers and televised programs concerning self-esteem. This article invites a return to those strategies, which were successfully employed by yesterday's families.

In conclusion, the preamble to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child²⁹ proclaimed that the child should mature in a family environment and an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding, which the convention believes would assure the complete and harmonious development of the child's personality. This observation is consistent with my earlier proposition that the family, not the courts, schools, or other social or government agencies, is the best means for nurturing children and enhancing their self-esteem. Therefore, those of us in the "helping professions" must support families, from our various vantage points in a sensitive and non-judgmental manner, and work cooperatively with families in the best interest of children. Professionals must set aside counter-productive views and condescending, inappropriate, if not outright racist or classist, behaviors. We need to demonstrate a concern for all children, beginning with the manner in which mothers are treated before the children are born. We must care for the children

27. Charlotte Reed, Ed.D, Panel Presentation at the "Family Law and Best Interest of the Child" Conference at Ripon College, Ripon, Wis. (Apr. 12, 1991).

28. Gene Leach, Norma Leach & Pat Schroeder, "Ways To Enhance Student Self-Esteem: Tips For Parents" (1990) (unpublished class paper on file with the author).

29. ABA Center on Children and the Law, Preamble, *Children's Rights in America: United Nations Convention on Rights of Child Compared With United States Law* (Dec., 1990).

after birth, providing adequate food, shelter and clothing for families in need or employment for heads of households. We must educate children and their parents, and we must change the manner in which we care for people when they become ill, hurt or troublesome. Finally, we should modify how we handle the loss of childhood. Let us not repeat the errors of the educational, legal, medical and social systems depicted in such novels as *There Are No Children Here*.³⁰ The persons described in that novel ignored the needs of families and children, delayed necessary services and programs and denied the existence of deplorable circumstances, until it was too late and there were no children there.

30. KOTLOWITZ, *supra* note 15.

