

I SWORE I'd Never Do That!

"YOU CAN DRIVE THE DEVIL OUT OF YOUR GARDEN,
BUT YOU WILL FIND HIM AGAIN IN THE GARDEN OF YOUR SON."

-Heinrich Pestalozzi

Have you ever wondered about how it is that you suddenly find your self sounding like your mother or father? Or, upon looking deeper, have you ever noticed that you are repeating certain family patterns that surprise you? "How can that be?" you mutter to yourself, "I swore I'd never do that!"

Don Elium, instructor of a course at John F. Kennedy University called "Healing the Wounded Parent and the Wounded Child," says:

"The basic reason we recreate negative patterns is that we're denying. And generational cycles are passed on because the pain hurts so bad, it has to be repressed and denied. Then our denial creates blind spots. 'I'll never control my kids the way my parents controlled me,' we may promise, but then we do anyway, by wanting them to be happy."

When we parent, it looks different but it's really the same story with the same theme. It's just acted out with different characters and a slightly different plot. As Elium indicates, we may end up attempting to "control" our children by trying so hard to assure that they never experience unhappiness, never suffer hurt, never experience frustration or failure. We try so hard to make things "perfect" for our children that we do not even see how driven we are by our inner need for control.

Do we ever realize we are doing this? Often, it is only when some striking incident occurs in the life of our child that forces us to face the terrible truth that we do NOT have control...and we suddenly come face to face with our own fears and our own pain. The incident can be as small as our daughter not being included on the guest list for a birthday party or as large as the discovery that our son has a learning disability. Either way, we come face to face with our powerlessness, and we are presented with the "opportunity" come to terms with our own issues in a new way.

*"AT EVERY STAGE, OUR CHILDREN REFLECT OUR OWN STRENGTHS AND FOIBLES,
OUR DOUBTS AND DEMONS, OUR CHILDHOOD MEMORIES,
PLEASURABLE OR MENACING, RESOLVED OR UNRESOLVED."*

With these powerful words, author Elizabeth Fischel invites us to look at ourselves and the "emotional baggage" we bring from our own childhood into our quest to be better parents. She has written an award-winning parenting book entitled *I Swore I'd Never Do That* which helps parents to recognize their family patterns and make wiser parenting choices by expanding their self-awareness. I have borrowed many of her thoughts to share with you here today. If you are interested, consider borrowing her book for a deeper look.

How Do Our Childhood Experiences Affect Our Parenting?

The mirrors our children hold up to us reveal not only the present, but also the ghosts of our past. The issues, events, and stages of our children that are easy or difficult for us will depend on the inner struggles we are currently contending with and whether or not we have made peace with our own past.

"IN OUR BABY'S HOWLS, OUR OWN ANSWERED OR UNANSWERED HOWLS ECHO BACK TO US. IN OUR TODDLER'S TEMPER TANTRUMS, WE RE-EXPERIENCE OWN ISSUES WITH SEPARATION, ANGER, AND THE STRUGGLE TO BE INDEPENDENT. IN OUR TEENAGER'S RAGES, OUR OWN STORMS ARE REPLAYED."
(-E. Fischel)

Let's take a closer look at some of the key issues and dynamics we bring into the "dance" with our children. As we parent, we are drawing new maps for our children that are tracing the lines of the old maps which we carry from our parents.

- *Our Family Blueprint*

Our inner blueprint for a "family" always comes from our own family of origin. Elizabeth Fischel reminds us that "each of us creates our dream of a new family out of our response to our old one." If our family's small size felt cozy, we hope to repeat it. If it felt constricted, we hope to enlarge it. If we were lost in a sea of siblings, we may swear to have only one child. If we grew up with two boys and a girl in our family, we may feel incompleteness after having two sons and respond to that inner "urge" to try for a daughter to "complete the picture."

Conversely, if we had to be the caretaker of younger siblings, we may resist the idea of having children, or we may distance ourselves from their dependency, fearing that we will be suffocated by their needs. If our mother had to work and we experienced her absence in our childhood, we may then struggle valiantly to find ways to be at home with our young children, even putting our career on hold.

- *Attempting Mastery and Transformation*

We tend to repeat with our children the things we vowed to avoid. Why? We repeat because we're *unconscious*. It's out of our awareness. "We repeat out of memory, instinct, out of a knee-jerk response to the past," says Fischel. "We repeat because we had no other lessons than the lessons we learned at our parent's knees. We had no other teachers, we see no other options.

We repeat in an unconscious effort at mastery and control. We repeat the painful episodes of our childhoods in the hope of making sense of them now. We also repeat to make the passive *active*, to *do* instead of *be done to*. We repeat in order not to feel out of control. *This time we hope we'll magically create the happy ending we so yearned for as a child.*"

- *Our Role In The Family*

We often identify with our children in ways that are shaped by our own roles in our childhood families. If we were a leader or follower, dependable or flighty--we often replay the original role in the family we create.



If my boundary stops here
I have daughters to draw new maps on the world
they will draw the lines of my face
they will draw with my gestures, my voice
they will speak my words thinking they have
invented them.

They will invent them
they will invent me
I will be planted again and again
I will wake in the eyes of their children's children
they will speak my words.

-Ruth Whitman
(in the voice of pioneer woman Tamsen Donner)

Peggy Papp, a family therapist, says that we tend to assume the same “emotional position” that we had in our family of origin. So, if we felt left out by our siblings, we may be more sensitive to feeling hurt and shut out by our own children. Or, we may be overly sensitive to what looks like rejection of our child. If we felt victimized by a parent’s angry outbursts, we may again feel victimized by our child’s tantrums and have more difficulty handling anger than someone else with a different history. *Sometimes, it is hard to extend our compassion beyond our remembered role, and our children may pick up the shortfall.*

- *Sibling Position and Birth Order*

Birth order is also a key in understanding how we relate to our children. We often align with the child who takes on our birth order position--or we have heightened conflict or “emotional intensity” with the child who takes the position of the sibling we experienced the most difficulty with in our family of origin.

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OUR CHILDHOOD ARE
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OWN CHILDREN.

For instance, it can be much more difficult to identify with our oldest child’s rivalry and jealous feelings towards his younger baby brother if we were the youngest child in our family and we were victimized by an older brother or sister. We may expect more of a child in one position and indulge a child in the opposite position. Often, it is especially difficult to empathize with our child’s feelings because the situation has pushed our old sibling “hot buttons,” even though we are unaware of it. The sibling issues of our childhoods are continually replayed and reworked with our own children in various ways.

- *Family Rules*

All families have rules--spoken and unspoken--which govern behavior. These are known to everyone, even the smallest child. They include ways of doing things, “what’s OK and what’s not OK,” how to treat others, and what subjects are completely taboo. Family rules govern household functioning, family celebrations, social life, relationships, privacy and personal boundaries. Early on, children pick up what topics are open for discussion, and what issues make the grown-ups uncomfortable. Children will not risk upsetting family stability by violating family rules about highly charged issues.

We all carry our family rules with us as we grow up, and these rules often operate out of our awareness, directing our behavior in our all our relationships. Sometimes, these rules are outmoded and ill-fitted for our new family. Sometimes they are unrealistic and unhealthy, particularly if we grew up in a family with real dysfunction, such as alcoholism or abuse. Some of our unexamined family rules may keep us stuck in unhealthy patterns of living.

FAMILY RULES
What did you grow up with?

- It’s not OK to talk about problems
- Communication is best if it is indirect
- Be strong
- Don’t rock the boat
- Do as I say– not as I do
- It’s not OK to enjoy yourself
- Boys don’t cry
- Feelings should not be expressed openly
- Be perfect
- Don’t be selfish

These family rules can cause us internal tension because we feel guilty if we don’t follow them. They can also cause us external tension in our family when our children (or spouse) don’t live up to our expectations.

- *Projection*

What also complicates our family process is that we tend to project our own internal dilemmas onto our children. Too often, our children (particularly when there are two) provide a screen on which to project our own two sides: assertive/soft, decisive/confused, intellectual/physical and so forth. When we haven’t integrated our dichotomies, we may let our children play out the two opposites.

Sometimes, our child carries a strength that we wish we had, so we over-identify with that child. Or sometimes, we distance from a child who carries a part of ourselves that we don’t like or that we fear. Perhaps the anger (or rebelliousness? or stubbornness?) in our child is the very quality we have split off and find contemptuous in ourselves, so we handle it by hating that part in our child.

What we cherish or criticize about our children will depend in large part on what we are comfortable or shaky with about ourselves.

UNKNOWINGLY,
WE MAY PROJECT
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SIDE" ONTO
OUR CHILD.

Jungian therapists call these unacceptable parts of ourselves our "shadow side" and explain that we may project this "dark" side onto others. Unfortunately, without knowing it, we may find ourselves doing this with our children. *Remember to take notice when you have an intense, negative reaction, particularly one that persists over time. It may be something in your child that you don't like in yourself.*

- *Style of Communication*

Was everyone a yeller in your family and was conflict considered "normal," rather than something to be feared? Did people like to argue and discuss issues, with a lot of heat and passion? Or, was conflict considered a "bad" thing? Did one parent always try to "keep the peace" and ignore problems? Were individual feelings and differences listened to and respected in your family--or were family members shamed and humiliated for "being weak" or "showing their feelings"?

If we don't learn another way of interacting, we will tend to automatically repeat those communication styles that we saw enacted in our own families. We will expect our spouse and children to "dance the same steps" that were danced in our family. What was permitted emotionally, we will permit. What was not permitted, we will tend to discourage. Conflict often arises in a marriage if our spouse came from one family style and we came from another, and our differences do not get discussed and resolved. Our children then become caught in the middle and they become confused.



WE TEND TO
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- *Anger*

How anger was approached and handled in our family of origin will often get passed on to us and then to our children. If anger was an unacceptable, untolerated emotion in our family, we will likely come to parenthood believing that anger is an unhealthy emotion and should be stifled. Or, we may allow anger but have no skills that will help us to help our child handle and contain his anger. Even more troublesome, we may be unprepared for handling the force of our *own* anger when pushed to the limit with our child.

If we were wounded by parental anger as a child, we may experience our child's anger as a *personal* assault. We may feel hurt and betrayed ("he doesn't love me"), rather than seeing his anger as a normal expression of his frustration or his push for independence. Similarly, if we grew up with a parent who frequently raged and exploded, we may find ourselves unconsciously repeating these patterns and exploding at our own child.

Despite the fact that we carry wounds from these experiences, and we always vowed we would "do it differently," we tend to repeat what was done to us. We may then give our children very mixed messages: it's OK for us to yell and hit you (because we're bigger)--but it's not OK for you to get angry and hit your brother/sister. We often carry a great deal of guilt and shame in the area of anger and its expression.

- *Discipline and Parenting Style*

How our parents handled discipline directly influences our interactions with our own children as we struggle to set limits and boundaries. Often, we are caught in the extremes of either repetition or rebellion. Dr. Spock first noted that "Parents tend to punish their children in the same way their parents punished them." However, many of us carry anger about the way we were severely disciplined in highly rigid, authoritarian homes and we have sworn to do it differently. Paradoxically, we may polarize and swing to the opposite end, becoming passive and unable to set appropriate limits at all!

The following are some general themes that are repeated in parenting from one generation to the next:

WE OFTEN FIND
OURSELVES
CAUGHT IN THE
EXTREMES OF
EITHER REPETITION
OR REBELLION.

★ Did we grow up with parents who were *ABUSIVE, TYRANNICAL, OR PUNITIVE*? If so, we know that in adulthood, such people may have more trouble than most expressing affection, be predisposed to use physical punishment, may tend to put their needs before their children's (inappropriately, at times), and may have a low tolerance for normal child behaviors.

★ Parents who grew up in *VERY PROTECTIVE* homes will often have lots of rules, set strict limits, shape and control their child's behavior, see problems in advance and try to solve them.

★ Those adults whose parents adopted an *"IN CHARGE" STYLE (DISCIPLINARIAN, AUTHORITATIVE, OR DEMOCRATIC)* will tend to parent in this way: be firm but friendly, be responsive but not yield to a child's unreasonable demands, set clear limits but be non-punitive, and expect age-appropriate independent behavior.

★ Parents who grew up in *EASYGOING* households will frequently have few set limits with their own children, let their child determine the choices, and be likely to wait until there is a problem before acting on it.

★ Growing up with *PUSHOVER* parents may incline parents towards giving in to a child's demands and arranging the family's life around the child's needs.

• Addictions

If we grew up in a family where one or both parents struggled with chemical addiction, we carry many unseen effects into our adult lives and into our parenting. Those of us who grew up in an alcoholic household never learned what "normal" meant. Our family life was organized around the alcoholic and trying to create physical and emotional safety in an unpredictable world.

We developed survival tools--ways to cope that helped us survive. Some of us became caretakers, learning styles of codependent or "enabling" behavior. Many of us saw an example set by our parents of concealing the addiction and denying their feelings about it. Habits of secrecy in an alcoholic family are common, and there are often expectations for children to be "loyal" and guard the family secret by hiding events and feelings. Relaxed communication and good parental role-modeling may have been rare. Growing up in this environment, we may carry some of these issues into our parenting: feeling overly responsible for everyone and everything, not sharing feelings or information because of old habits of secrecy and denial, confusion about whether a problem is ours or our child's, the inability to identify and express our feelings, a difficulty recognizing our child's feelings as well as being overwhelmed by our child's feelings, and a strong desire to control our child's life.

• Family Trauma or Tragedy

If we experienced a significant family trauma such as a death, loss, accident, separation, illness, or divorce, we may find that the emotional pain from that childhood experience can get called into play when we parent our own children. Often, when our child reaches the same developmental age as we were when we experienced the trauma, we find "anniversary reactions" occur in one form or another.

We may unconsciously respond to our child as though the old event is going to happen again--but this time to him or her. We may become guarded, over-protective, hyper-sensitive. We may project our worries onto our child. For example, one parent found it difficult to leave her daughter alone with sitter (ever!) because her younger sister had died suddenly at age three, and she feared this happening to her own daughter. A father found it difficult to let his son engage in high risk physical activity because his younger brother was seriously hurt in a tragic sporting accident. Life was never again "safe" for him after that life-altering incident and he still carried those buried feelings with him.

★
When we say,
"...this feels familiar,"
we may be noticing
that an experience
with our child is
bringing up something
from our past.

If we experienced abandonment as a child, we may find ourselves triggered by loss, angered by our child moving away from us (physically or emotionally) and “leaving us behind.” Even more troubling, we may experience again as an adult the same trauma we experienced as a child. For instance, in going through a divorce (which we experienced once as a child), and we may find that we have difficulty being “emotionally available” to our child because we are flooded by all our own childhood hurts that get reignited by this old loss occurring in a new setting. When we say “this feels familiar”--we may be noticing that an experience with our child is bringing up something for us from our past.

- *Healing Old Wounds*

What we cannot heal as a child, we will attempt to heal as adults. One of the ways we do this is by trying to heal our unmet needs through our children. This is our way of trying to gain mastery and resolution over our “unfinished (emotional) business.” We often find ourselves trying to give our child what we missed when we were younger.

Sometimes, we may be unable to separate what our child truly needs from our own unmet needs. Our understanding may get blurred in these areas because we may still feel the pain from not receiving all that we needed emotionally from a parent.

I observe that parents often give their child what *they* needed from *their* parent, but it misses the mark completely because their child has different needs. For example, one mother listened with empathy to her child, engaging in long dialogues about her child’s needs and feelings. This parent had been a sensitive child and had always longed for emotional attunement and acceptance of her intense feelings by her parents. Unfortunately, her own mother had been distant and unavailable, unable to give her what she craved. This parent’s child, however, was strong and independent by temperament, and she needed firm, clear limits from her mother--not endless dialoguing about feelings. Eventually, mother saw that she was parenting her daughter according to what she herself needed but didn’t receive, and she realized her daughter was a very different person, with her own unique needs.

DANGER:
We may try to
heal our old
wounds or meet
our unmet needs
through our own
children.

Questions to Think About...

- What was the most positive aspect of your upbringing, a strength you bring to adulthood and your children?
 - What did your parents do with you that you would NOT want to repeat with your children?
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The Healing Potential of Our Children

There is hope! Having a new arena with our own children gives us a chance to rework old patterns in a healthy way. Here is the healing power of the “second life” our children offer us, the hidden message of the “ghosts” in the nursery. Here is our chance to re-experience and maybe this time master our own childhood aches and uncertainties as we help our children handle and master their own. If we do this with honesty and self-awareness, we can truly rework some of our past issues in a healthy way.

Bruno Bettelheim, well-known child psychiatrist, writes:

“the fact that the parent delves into his past to understand his child and the child feels that his parent is doing this to help him brings the child and parent much more closely together as they wrestle with the situation. This is why I say that the child and the parent are the problem, but also the solution.”

Tips for Healing Your Parenting

- *Stop denying...and "Remember..."*
As family counselor, Don Elium says, "the basic reason we recreate negative patterns is that we're denying. And generational cycles are passed on because the pain hurts so bad, it has to be repressed and denied. Then our denial creates blind spots. When we deny that we'll become our parents, we do any way...just in different ways..."
- *Remembering childhood feelings allows us to break the cycle.*
"Healing begins by acknowledging the wounded child in our own psyche. Until we can feel compassion for ourselves, we can't give our children that unconditional love that allows imperfections." says Sandra Oriel, Chicago therapist.
- *Be willing to look honestly at yourself.*
Get to know yourself. Face the skeletons in the closet. The gift of consciousness and self-awareness can give us the tools we need to be the healthy parents we want to be, free of "contamination" from our own unresolved issues.
- *Take a "family snapshot."*
Look closely at your family of origin dynamics. The more aware you become, the easier it is to separate your own "stuff" from your child's experience.
- *Find a safe place to share.*
Search for trustworthy relationships where you can process your feelings and explore your childhood experiences: a good friend, a mother's support group, a mentor, counselor or therapist. We all need someone to listen to our feelings, empathize with our pain, and validate our reality. In this way, we make sense of and create meaning out of our life experiences.
- *Make peace with the past.*
Work diligently to find a way to come to peace with the hurts of your childhood. This does not mean to forget. Nor does it mean to excuse or justify childhood abuse. But we try to forgive so that we can let go of the hurts that keep us bound up in pain and move on. Forgiveness helps us to break the cycle of repetition. Understanding and forgiving our parents is the true gift we give to our own children. For example, in an alcoholic family, what gets handed down is not just the pattern of using a substance to feel better (i.e. drinking) but also the communication patterns of secrecy, denial of the problem, putting on "masks" to survive, and the shaky self-esteem that results from living with .

A child of survivors says: "I always sensed my parents' pain and loss and tried to make up for it. I think both generations tried to protect each other by not talking about it. But the pain does not go away by not talking about it. *How* you talk about it is crucial. " As time went on, I became the family's repository for pain. I felt worried and anxious a lot; depression set in. I carried the family's shadow and I felt deeply what wasn't expressed."
- *Find the balance.*
The process of change often involves finding a middle ground between the extremes of repetition of the past and the extremes of rebellion in the present. It means finding the best of what our parents gave us and adding our own understanding, insight, learning, and conscious skills.
- *Develop true parental empathy.*
Real empathy requires us to suffer and rejoice along with our children--to both understand their experiences and to help give them meaning. But the most generous form of parental empathy is being willing to put ourselves in our children's shoes while continuing to walk forward in our own shoes. This means keeping a separateness between you and your child--knowing your child without finding yourself in him!

KEEP A "HEALTHY
SEPARATENESS"
...
KNOW YOUR CHILD
WITHOUT FINDING
YOURSELF IN HIM

SOME ESPECIALLY HELPFUL BOOKS

- ***I Swore I'd Never Do That: Recognizing Family Patterns and Making Wise Choices.*** Elizabeth Fishel, Conari Press, 1991.
 - ***Giving The Love That Heals: A Guide for Parents.*** Harville Hendrix and Helen Hunt, Pocket Books, 1997.
 - ***Forgiving Our Parents, Forgiving Ourselves.*** Dr. David Stoop and Dr. James Masteller, Servant Publishers, 1991.
 - ***Kids Who Carry Our Pain.*** Dr. Robert Hemfelt and Dr. Paul Warren, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990.
 - ***The Family.*** John Bradshaw, Health Communications, 1988.
 - ***Healing The Shame That Binds You.*** John Bradshaw, Health Communications, 1988.
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♥ As you move into the holiday season, take a moment for reflection...

A PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR STOOD BEFORE HIS CLASS AND HAD SOME ITEMS IN FRONT OF HIM. WHEN CLASS BEGAN, WORDLESSLY HE PICKED UP A LARGE EMPTY MAYONNAISE JAR AND PRECEDED TO FILL IT WITH ROCKS, ROCKS ABOUT 2" IN DIAMETER. HE THEN ASKED THE STUDENTS IF THE JAR WAS FULL. THEY AGREED THAT IT WAS. SO THE PROFESSOR THEN PICKED UP A BOX OF PEBBLES AND POURED THEM INTO THE JAR. HE SHOOK THE JAR LIGHTLY. THE PEBBLES, OF COURSE, ROLLED INTO THE OPEN AREAS BETWEEN THE ROCKS. HE ASKED THE STUDENTS AGAIN IF THE JAR WAS FULL. THEY AGREED THAT IT WAS. THE STUDENTS LAUGHED. THE PROFESSOR PICKED UP A BOX OF SAND AND POURED IT INTO THE JAR. OF COURSE, THE SAND FILLED UP EVERYTHING ELSE.

"NOW, SAID THE PROFESSOR, "I WANT YOU TO PRETEND THAT THIS IS YOUR LIFE. THE ROCKS ARE THE IMPORTANT THINGS--YOUR FAMILY, YOUR PARTNER, YOUR CHILDREN, YOUR HEALTH--ANYTHING THAT IS SO IMPORTANT TO YOU THAT IF IT WERE LOST IT WOULD YOUR WOULD BE NEARLY DESTROYED. THE PEBBLES ARE THE OTHER THINGS THAT MATTER TO YOU...LIKE YOUR JOB, YOUR HOUSE, YOUR CAR. THE SAND IS EVERYTHING ELSE. THE SMALL STUFF. IF YOU PUT THE SAND INTO THE JAR FIRST, THERE IS NO ROOM FOR THE PEBBLES OR THE ROCKS. THE SAME GOES FOR YOUR LIFE.

IF YOU SPEND ALL YOUR ENERGY AND TIME ON THE SMALL STUFF, YOU WILL NEVER HAVE ROOM FOR THE THINGS THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO YOU. PAY ATTENTION TO THE THINGS THAT ARE CRITICAL TO YOUR HAPPINESS. PLAY WITH YOUR CHILDREN. TAKE TIME TO GET MEDICAL CHECK-UPS. TAKE YOUR PARTNER OUT DANCING. THERE WILL ALWAYS BE TIME TO GO TO WORK, CLEAN THE HOUSE, GIVE A DINNER PARTY, AND FIX THE DISPOSAL. TAKE CARE OF THE ROCKS FIRST--THE THINGS THAT REALLY MATTER. SET YOUR PRIORITIES. THE REST IS JUST SAND."

(author unknown)

Happy Holidays!

Be well. Have fun. And remember to stop and take time.

Be still. Watch your children growing.

Before you know it, they will have left their caterpillar stage.

They will emerge from their cocoon, having become beautiful butterflies

with wings strong enough to fly away.

