

The Six Ways You Influence Your Child

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As parents we may think that by loving, spending time with, communicating, and properly disciplining our children we hold the key to their optimal development. This is true, since parents are their children's strongest role models. However, more fundamental to the formation of our child's personality development is not simply our child rearing techniques, but who we are as a person. Our own behaviors and attitudes are the primary influences that shape our children's sense of self, whether we are aware of these or not.

Children are like sponges that daily absorb their parent's overt and subtle expressions, attitudes, mannerisms and life perspectives, and these are the elements that deeply form their identity. We as parents have a mixture of qualities in our own personalities that we either inherited from our own parents, or acquired from interactions with significant others, the world and from our unique life experiences. Even the most well meaning parent will unconsciously impact their child in both positive and negative ways. This is a universal condition that is unavoidable. It is beneficial for us as parents to become aware of how we are shaping our child's identity, and attempt wherever possible to prevent the replication of our own undesirable behaviors that we believe are not worthy of passing on to our children. This article provides some guidelines and assistance in this endeavor from an Eidetic Image Psychology perspective.

Ideally, the mother is the primary container of a young child's life experience. If the mother is warm and sensitive to their child's needs, the child will develop with a strong sense of wholeness. If the child's mother is controlling, cold, depressed, angry or hostile, the child's development will be thwarted. Fathers, on the other hand, are meant to nudge the young child into actively interacting and relating to the world outside of mother. A father takes the child and teaches him

about the world by taking him places, doing things with him and showing him how to interact in the world. If one's father is confident, loving and is capable of teaching their child about the world outside of mom's safety, the world is perceived as an inviting and interactive place in which the child can actively participate with self-confidence. If, however, the father himself has problems dealing with the world, the child can adopt a similar world view, in which he (too) lacks the tools to be potent in his own life interactions.

Even the most loving of parents can create unwanted symptoms in their children without being aware of doing so. Common examples include:

★ A parent who is overly probing may produce the opposite result, such as a child who is secretive and will not share. As a result of growing up in an atmosphere of intrusiveness, the child's secretive behavior often becomes habitual. This may have consequences for the child in later life when they are desirous of forming deep friendships or love relationships and they find that they are unable to share their deepest emotions.

★ An overly critical parent, trying to teach their child to do the right thing may produce a child who becomes passive and indecisive for fear that their decisions will be judged.

★ Children reared in a home where they are loved, but where their parents fight all the time can become insecure because their sense of internal unity and security is compromised.

★ Anxious parents may generate restless children as their children cannot relax in the nervous aura of their parent.

★ Overprotective parents can create symptoms of depression in their child because their child is forced to hold back their pure unadulterated need for exploration and freedom.

So, a child's relationship with their parent can manifest in a variety of overt or subtle symptoms based on the problems of identity of a particular parent and also by living in the atmosphere of a parent's unresolved emotions that inundate their child's consciousness as they grow.

We often imitate our parents in how we raise our children without realizing it. How often have you heard someone say, "I am shocked that I am acting just like my mother did when I was a child. The same words fly out of my mouth towards my daughter in the exact way my mother's did to me before I am even aware of what I am saying."

A clear example of this was the dinners I attended at the home of John, a friend whom I have known since childhood. When we were children his father would constantly correct him at the dinner table by saying words such as, "For God's sake's John, when will you learn to use that fork correctly? Or, "John, stop fidgeting with your food and just eat." I would always bristle when I heard these critical words and John and I would often speak about how hurtful his father's criticisms were towards him. He swore he would never treat his children that way. Fast forward 30 years to dinner at my friend John's current home with his wife and three sons. As the dinner progressed, I was shocked to hear the exact same tone and voice that I heard from his father coming from John's mouth towards his own sons. "Mike, for God's sake's, how many times have I told you how to use your fork and knife correctly?" and "Mike, when will you ever learn to say please and thank you to your mother when the butter is passed?"

Just as we imitate our parents without awareness, our children will imitate or react to us in various ways. Dr. Akhter Ahsen, the leading theoretician of Eidetic Image Psychology has discovered that there are six key ways that a parent's personality shapes his child's. In all of these, the child loses a genuine part of

their identity as they are in imitation or reaction to their parents.

1. Imitation: Children imitate their parents. They adopt attitudes and emotions existing in their parents without realizing they are doing it. A daughter watching her mother looking in the mirror questioning, "do I look fat?" will begin to imitate this self-critical behavior. She, too, will look into the mirror and see flaws. Fortunately, daughters also imitate their mother's confidence and self-assurance. The child of an angry father imitates the angry behavior of his father and lashes out at playmates. On the other hand, a child seeing his father helping and being kind to people will develop a similar attitude towards others.

2. Identification: Identification is more fundamental than imitation. It is not just replicating a parent's behavior. It means sharing the views, attitudes and feelings of one's parent so that a child feels identical to their parent in that regard. For example, a father who is very conservative, dresses in a conventional style, believes in one's sons serving in the military, and is steadfast in being loyal to his country above all else, has a daughter who shares his exact same world view and marries a man just like her father. This daughter has deeply identified with her father's beliefs and ways of being and may have lost a sense of who she truly is, which might differ from him. Identifications are becoming just like a parent in some aspect of their world view and behavior.

3. Reaction: Reaction is a behavior directly opposite to parent's behavior. Reaction is often seen in teenagers yet, the traits may last a lifetime. For example, a parent may be very religious and their child rebels, saying he is an atheist and refuses to go to church. Or a parent may be very neat and the child opposes the parent by becoming very sloppy in their living and work environments. A parent may be painstaking about eating natural foods and taking vitamins and their child will react by eating junk foods and disregarding their health. In trying to find their own sense of identity, the child becomes so caught up in not being like his parents, that he loses sight of who he is and what he truly values.

4. Loss: When a young child is denied basic biological needs such as close bonding with their mother, lack of fathering, neglect, too rigid or too lenient discipline, or a myriad of other losses while growing up, they will suffer feelings of inner emptiness. This is fertile ground for the development of eating disorders, drug abuse, obsession with sexuality or acting out behaviors in which one strives to gain love and approval. We all have suffered various losses in our lives; however, the most potent losses leaves an emptiness or hole within one's psyche that is difficult to fill.

5. Projection: Projection occurs when one's own inaccurate subjective thoughts are attributed to other people. If a father refers to one of his two daughters as beautiful and the other as smart, the "smart" child may believe that she is ugly, even though this may be far from the truth. Conversely, the beautiful daughter may feel stupid. A father who is not involved in the daily life of his children because he has to work two jobs to feed his family due to economic necessity (and out of love for his family) may have a child who imagines that her father does not love her because he is never home. She will grow up feeling unloved even though this is not true. Children make false assumptions about themselves and inaccurate interpretations about their lives in response to a parent's statements or behaviors, even though a remark may have been casual. This tendency is unavoidable and can only be discovered through open communication.

6. Attachment: Attachment is dependent behavior that is biologically necessary for a baby or a small child. However, if parents cannot let go and give their maturing child autonomy, they thwart their child's self-reliance. The child will then become insecure and incapable of trusting his own inner resources to handle life as an adult. A college student told me that her mother called daily to tell her how to dress and what to do with her day. The mother's interference and dependency made her daughter distrustful of her own opinions and feelings. A secure parent, however, knows when to let go and when to hang on, and allows their child to develop self-reliance.

To see what you may be transmitting to your child, take a moment to do this imagery exercise. Your feelings of self-acceptance or rejection will reveal your personal sense of how you feel about yourself.

Standing Before A Mirror

1. Relax for a moment and close your eyes and focus inwardly.
2. See an image that you are standing before a mirror. Just look, what do you see?
3. How do you feel seeing yourself? Do you like your face and body? Let all of your feelings, both positive and negative, emerge as you look at yourself.
4. Now look into your eyes, there is a feeling or story there. What do you see? Let all the emotions surface.
5. What qualities and emotions are you seeing in your own face and eyes? What do you like about yourself and what do you dislike.
6. Do you basically feel positive, negative, or mixed about what you see?

In order to understand how you may be influencing your child, it is first important to recognize how you feel about your own self, the inner self-criticisms you carry and the positive feelings of self, which emanate to your child in your daily interactions with them. ■

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