

GROWING

UP



AGAIN

Parenting
Ourselves,
Parenting
Our Children

JEAN ILLSLEY CLARKE, *Author of Self-Esteem: A Family Affair*
and CONNIE DAWSON

GROWING UP AGAIN

Parenting Ourselves, Parenting Our Children

JEAN ILLSLEY CLARKE and CONNIE DAWSON



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Getting Started

This is a book of hope. Hope for adults who grew up with parenting that they want to avoid passing on to their children. It is also for adults who want to grow up again, whether they have already begun that journey or whether they have only a whispered wish of getting what they needed earlier and did not get.

We wrote this book because we believe that children are important and adults are important. And we believe that families are the primary places where children learn how to be adults.

We respect families — their strength, their tenacity, their attempts to create systems where human beings can learn, grow, love, and care for themselves and each other.

We believe that children deserve helpful, “even parenting” and that adults deserve to be able to break the chain of “uneven parenting,” a chain that may be new or that may have haunted their families for generations.

Please notice that we refer to parenting that has been less than adequate as uneven, not as dysfunctional. If our families had not functioned, we would not have some of the skills that we have. Somehow our families were functional. Some parts of them worked. We don’t believe it helps any of us to be burdened with a negative label.

Here are some beliefs common to people who received uneven parenting: *I am not lovable. There is no way out. Nobody can tell me what to do or tell me what not to do. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what is normal. I don’t know who I am.* If you received uneven parenting, you can use this book to help your-

self and your children.

We wrote the book using ideas drawn from many sources and from the experiences of many people. There are lots of examples of “what to do” as well as “what not to do” because we believe that any person or book that tells us what is wrong, needs to offer ways to do things better.

Some examples are arranged in charts. This will let you scan the chart and pick out the topics most interesting to you. It will also help you locate examples you may want to go back to for further ideas.

Since it’s easier for some to learn by doing instead of reading, there are some activities in the appendixes to help you practice new behaviors or move to a deeper level of understanding. You can turn to the appendixes as you read the book or you may want to come back to them later.

Many examples are identified by age. You can use each example two ways. If you have a child that age, you can use the ideas to help you think about your parenting. Or you can use them to think about your own journey. You might imagine yourself receiving the positive parenting described, and celebrate getting that if you did. If you didn’t get all the positive parenting you needed then, you can decide to give yourself those healthy messages as you read.

You may say, “Yes, but, that’s not the way it was for me.” That is why you are reading this book. We are talking about *now*, not *then*, what is, not what was. And *now* you deserve loving, caring messages, and this is the time you can give them to yourself. Or you may say, “But, I already should know how to raise children,” or, “I have already made so many mistakes I don’t even want to think about it. I feel too ashamed.”

This is the place for a few words about shame and guilt. Guilt is about our behavior. It is useful. It helps us feel uncomfortable when we have made a mistake and motivates us to start anew or make amends.

Shame is a judgment about who we are, not about what we do. Its nagging voice pushes us to hide or lash out. It immobilizes us completely and causes us to avoid growth. When we feel ashamed we are alienated from others. Our other feelings — guilt, joy, anger, fear, and sadness — can be shared in ways that help us feel connected with other people. But we hide our shame; it isolates us.

Shame comes about when our sense of self becomes too closely linked with our doing, our accomplishments. Then,

when we don't do well or fear that we won't do well, our very being, our very worth feels threatened. No wonder we avoid responsibility and hide or quickly throw shame onto others.

We believe that shame is a response to lack of unconditional love. Children need to be loved so well that they can learn to love themselves. Those of us who often feel ashamed didn't get that love or didn't get enough of it. So we try to buy love by doing things and we learn to distrust love that is freely offered. In addition, those of us who have experienced lots of criticism come to hear any directive as critical and therefore as a threat to our being, as shame producing.

Carole had uneven parenting. She had plenty of food and clothes and dolls, but her mom didn't understand about unconditional love and she really liked neatness.

At age two Carole rubbed banana in her hair. Mom said, "Carole, you are a mess," and shampooed Carole's hair.

At four Carole scattered her toys. Mom said, "Carole, you are a mess," and laughed and picked up the toys.

At nine Carole left her room untidy. Mom said, "Carole, you have always been a mess. Look at your brother's room. It is always clean." Then she laughed and cleaned Carole's room.

Carole's being and doing blended.

As an adult Carole was doing a design project with a friend. Carole carried four boxes of ideas into each work meeting. One day the friend gave Carole a file folder and said, "I was shopping and I got this folder for you and labeled it. If you put your things in here, you won't have to carry four boxes and we can start working sooner." The friend offered direction — the kind of clear *structure* Carole missed getting in her childhood — in a noncritical way. But Carole heard, "You are a mess" and was angry and felt ashamed.

Shame develops in response to victim blame: blaming ourselves, the victims, for what someone else does or did. Shame is a feeling we learned when our being and our doing were confused, either by someone who told us we are what we do, as Carole's mother did, or when we measure our worth as a person with our capability, perhaps as a response to criticism, abuse, rigidity, or being patronized, neglected, or abandoned.

If you experienced shaming or uneven parenting, use this book to help you parent your children without shaming them and to help yourself recognize shame and replace it with love and joy.

Growing Up Again

You can approach this book in a number of ways. Use it to

- improve the way you interact with your children no matter what their ages,
- improve your skills for taking care of yourself,
- evaluate the way you were parented, and
- discover areas in which you may need to heal from the uneven parenting in your family of origin.

Since all human beings need both Nurture and Structure, we offer sections on both. We placed Structure first, but you can use the book in the order that works best for you. We have grown a lot while we wrote this book. Now it is yours.

We wish you well,

Jean and Connie

Since males and females are equally important, female and male pronouns are used alternately in this book.

Introduction

Learning To Parent Ourselves and Others

*Like every parent, I want nothing
so much as my children's well-being.*

— Joyce Maynard

When we think about the well-being of our children, we plan to provide for them what was lacking for us. We want them to experience love and joy, to be successful and happy, to have a sense of self-worth. We want them to have self-esteem, to believe in themselves, and to feel both lovable and capable.

To achieve this work of wonder, we plan to copy the parts of the parenting we received that helped us and improve on the rest. We dream. We think and talk about how lovingly we will parent. Then, when the first child arrives, we come face to face with the reality that parenting is much more than a loving dream. It is the daily demand of knowing what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and then doing it. These demands continue in some form as long as we or our children live. Some parenting tasks we do over and over in monotonous repetition. Others we do only once. Some jar us with their unexpectedness and with how unprepared we are.

We don't always know what to do. Some days we find ourselves doing the very things we vowed we would never do, and we feel guilty, remorseful, and unable to change. Or we give in and deliver the same abuse inflicted on us, defending it as "character building."

We need to learn skills, often many skills, that we did not learn in our families of origin.

Nurture

Humans are born with few skills and have a great variety of needs. One thing children always need is unconditional love. They need the words and touch and care that say, "I love you; you are lovable." They need it to thrive and grow, to learn to love themselves and others. *Nurture* is what we call this essential contribution to children's growth and well-being. We will explore it at length in a later chapter.

Structure

But unconditional love is not enough. Children also need to learn limits, skills, and standards. They need to be safe, to learn healthy habits, to develop a sense of who they are and who others are, to learn values and ethics, to develop character, and to become responsible for themselves and to others. Children need parents to convey the message, *You can do this; I will teach you how; you are capable*. The parenting skills that support the development of these skills in a child we call *Structure*.

We can think of Structure as the building blocks that hold us upright and give shape to our life, that form the boundaries and the framework of our personality. Structure is built from many, many small experiences. We start building it in the family we grew up in and, hopefully, continue to build it bit by bit all our lives. A person with well developed Structure will define his sense of self from within and have strong character. He will be clear about who he is and who other people are in relation to him. We say of him, "He has plenty of backbone."

An adult with fewer building blocks than he needs does develop a framework, but it is not strong enough to keep him upright under pressure. He will not have firm edges and will be easily hurt as he allows other people to invade his boundaries. We say, "He is thin-skinned." He will also inappropriately wander into other people's physical or psychological territory. "He pokes his nose in where he doesn't belong."

Now flesh out the metaphor of the personality as a body, with Nurture providing the soft tissue and muscle beneath the skin that helps the bones move with freedom and grace.

Every experience of being loved adds a drop to the building of the personality. When a person receives and accepts Nurture in abundance, he develops a base of self-value and self-love that makes it easy for him to love and care for himself



and to love and care for others.

If he does not have enough Nurture droplets to fill out his personality, his Structure will allow him to appear to function, but there will be a hollowness or lack of joy in his life, and a lack of loving response to others.

Think of each Structure building block and Nurture drop as units of growth. The human infant arrives with his unique characteristics and proceeds to build his identity and self-esteem by accumulating, bit by bit, life's many experiences and his decisions about those experiences. While his parents cannot predict with certainty that he will have high esteem, be joyful, or succeed, they can continually strengthen their ability to offer a balance of sound Structure and loving Nurture, and not just do whatever is easier for them.

How do we learn the skills to give our children the Structure and the Nurture they need for their well-being? Some skills we learned from our parents. Some we learn by observing our own children and figuring out what works. Some we learn by getting information from others and then thinking about it. If our family wasn't good at providing us with some necessary Nurture and Structure skills, we can learn new ones now.

One caution — some people who received neglectful, abusive, or smothering parenting are so determined not to do the same to their children that they “parent by doing the opposite.” The hazard is that they often go too far. In an effort not to set limits and standards that are too rigid, they set too few. So they end up throwing out helpful Structure along with abuse and criticism. If they were not nurtured and did not receive unconditional love themselves, some parents smother in an attempt not to be neglectful. Or, if they were hampered by indulgent, overprotective love they may withhold love in order to ensure that they are not smothering. Children need a balance of Nurture and Structure and so do adults.

In the process of learning to provide for our children we need to learn better Nurture and Structure skills for ourselves as well. To finish the quote from Joyce Maynard:

Like every parent, I want nothing so much as my children's well-being. I want it so badly I may actually succeed in turning myself into a contented and well-adjusted person, if only for my children's sake.



Growing Up Again

Becoming contented and well-adjusted is a process filled with hope and is as important for us as it is for our children. The decision to rebuild ourselves, to grow up again, can be a sudden one, but the process is not. There is no quick fix. There is no magical, sudden way to borrow the needed skills and to reclaim our self-confidence and self-esteem. We must do it ourselves step by step; we must build from within. Responding to someone else's urging us to thump our chests and shout "I am the greatest" is questionable at best and harmful at worst. Done on a day when we are feeling directionless, depressed, or suicidal, this could add to our despair or further alienate us from our feelings.

True self-esteem comes from within and is not competitive. If it depends on being greater than others it is "competitive-esteem" or "other-esteem," not "self-esteem." Self-worth is claimed, bit by bit, by practicing being capable, by affirming ourselves in ways that are meaningful to us, and by learning to believe that we are lovable.

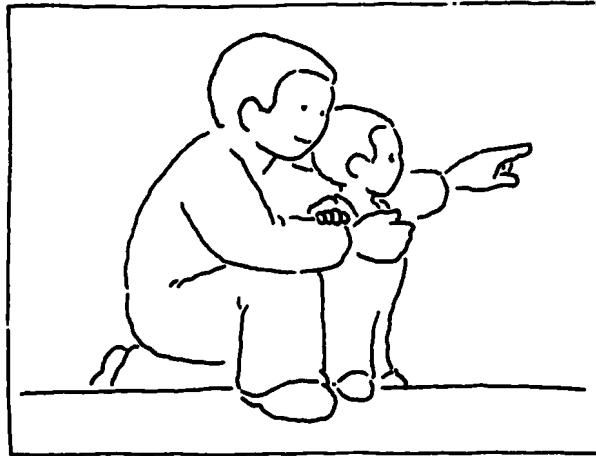
Competence and a feeling of well-being or self-esteem is important for both children and parents. We build our self-esteem by recognizing the positive and the negative messages and experiences life has offered us, and by making healthy decisions about those offerings. Nurture and Structure help us do this.

Since having firm Structure makes it easier to deliver loving Nurture, we'll explore Structure first, then Nurture.

SECTION I

STRUCTURE —

The Firm Side of Care



If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

— Henry David Thoreau

Structure

What It Is and Why We Need It

This chapter is about how to care for ourselves with joy and without guilt. It's also about helping children develop their own internal Structure or discipline based on self-esteem rather than fear or shame.

Self-discipline is the name that some parents give to their internal Structure. The external Structure parents provide for their children — the care and teaching, and the rules — help children develop their own internal Structure or self-discipline for taking care of themselves and other people. Parents may feel at sea about how to do this.

There is a lack of commonly accepted cultural standards today with widespread confusion and disagreement about the job parents have in structuring themselves and their children. In an effort to cast out the criticism, controls, and “shoulds” of pre-World War II parenting, we also cast out some of the ways we knew to set boundaries and standards. We threw the baby out with the bathwater. The cultural messages we get in this era are not only contradictory about how much Structure to give, but often suggest that self-discipline and responsibility for our actions are scarcely necessary. Count the number of messages in the media that encourage us to search for and expect quick relief of symptoms and distress by using drugs or violence without attention to underlying causes, or recognition that few problems can be solved in thirty or sixty minutes.

Both physically and emotionally, we need the safety and pro-