

Podcast #40 – Are Parents Always to Blame?

It seems as if psychologists are always blaming parents--especially mothers--for everything that goes wrong with their children. This tendency to blame mothers has a long history, of course. Following World War II, child "experts" -- especially people like Dr. Benjamin Spock -- counseled mothers about the emotional needs of their babies and the proper way to treat them. Their advice about child-rearing techniques were often quite stern—and actually disempowering to mothers-- describing as they did the various ways that mothering could and did fail. As researchers studied the vicissitudes of early attachment, the possibility or even probability that these delicate relationships could readily be disrupted reared its head throughout the world of child development.

As I considered my own clinical experience in treating adults, and the theoretical lens through which I understood their problems, I realized that I, too, usually placed the responsibility for adult psychological suffering at the doorstep of my patients' parents. And such a bias stemmed directly

from my theories about psychopathology and about the change process. So--my clinical work involves helping the patient identify the pathogenic beliefs that they formed in childhood, beliefs that ultimately inhibited or interfered with their healthy development. My approach emphasizes trauma—and how it affected the children involved. And trauma in the world of psychology almost always involves failures in family systems, including failures of empathy, recognition, as well as the failures inherent in various forms of abuse.

To give another example: a study of 17,000 people conducted in Southern California at Kaiser Permanente correlated the presence of what they called “adverse childhood experiences” with the development later on of various types of physical and psychological disorders. These adverse childhood experiences included physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, exposure to domestic violence, household substance abuse, and household mental illness. This is basically a list of things that parents did do--or could do-- wrong and\or were harmful to children. And, sure enough, the presence of these experiences in childhood

predicted the development of all sorts of mental and physical disorders later on.

See, this shouldn't surprise anyone. We know that childhood, especially early childhood, is a time when children are dependent in absolute ways on their parents to develop a sense of reality and morality. The child can't go to another family if things aren't working out well at home. The child's dependency is profound and makes the child vulnerable to his or her parents' moods, attitudes, behavior, and psychology. There is no other time in life in which one can be influenced by another person as there is in one's relationships with one's parents.

So, this is why we hold parents responsible for the psychological and emotional well-being of their children. Of course, it is also well known that children are born with certain temperaments, certain dispositions, and certain proclivities to react to trauma in ways that might be more or less resilient. So, for example, if a child is difficult to soothe or comfort -- something which may well be constitutional in the child -- then a parent who lacks patience may well especially harm that

particular child not because the parent is failing as a parent but because the interaction between the parent and child – – a two-way interaction – – is harmful. Some children, for instance, appear to be more resilient than others--able, in other words, to endure and somehow transcend familial trauma. Not a lot is known about the origin of such resilience, but its presence is undeniable and, therefore, we would, as a result have to locate some of the responsibility for the development of mental illness in the child as much as the parent.

So, one can look at the parent-child relationship as a two-way street, with each party responsible for the mental health outcomes in the child's development. However, no one would ore could ever argue that this two-way street is symmetrical. That is, it is incontrovertible that parents affect children more than children affect parents. For a child, the dependence on the parent is absolute. For the parent, his or her dependence on the child is only relative – – that is, the parent has other relationships and is engaged in other aspects of the social world than simply the relationship with the child. The relationship may be a two-way street, but the traffic is NOT equal in each direction.

So what stops us from being justifiably accused of parent blaming? Well, I think the issue concerns the concept of "blame." If we maintain that parents have an inordinate effect on children, that they have a life or death authority to define reality and morality for the child, and that therefore they are mainly responsible for the child's mental health outcome, is this the same as blame? I don't think so. I think that acknowledging that parents are responsible for their children's emotional well-being is simply empirical, observable, and objective. Blame is another matter altogether.

Blame involves disapproval, reproach, censure, and accusation. These are emotional states and not scientific observations.

There is a further reason why assigning responsibility for a child's psychic well-being to parents is not the same as blame. Parents are not simply agents of influence in their families, but are themselves often victims of forces beyond and outside their control. First of all, of course, parents were themselves once children and were shaped by their own parents. But more than that, parents live and rear their children in social and cultural worlds over which they have little control. Their approaches

to child rearing are affected by social standards, role-modeling, and propaganda.

So, for example, following World War II, there were profound changes in family structure and childrearing practices. Broad demographic trends resulted in the shrinking of family size, the breakdown of community bonds, the exit of women from the workforce, and massive suburbanization—all resulting in parenting taking place in small nuclear families and making women primarily responsible for children's emotional life and development. Men—fathers—commuted for longer hours and distances. Female domesticity was celebrated and childrearing advice was increasingly directed at women who no longer had extended families to help them in the task. The sense of alienation that women felt in the 1950s that resulted from such social changes was studied by Betty Friedan who called this suffering “the problem with no name.”

Thus, when we think about the ways that children are dependent on their parents for their core sense of reality and morality, we're mostly talking about their dependence on their

mothers. And their mothers were too often suffering—through no fault of their own.

So, understanding the social milieu in which our parents raised us should lead us to feel great compassion rather than critical judgment. Confronting the social causes of psychological suffering in parents should lead us to put the idiosyncratic mishaps in family life in a broader context. If we are feminists or social critics, for example, we should see child rearing as occurring in the context of gender oppression. In this way, we stop locating responsibilities solely and exclusively in the authority that parents have over children, and add to the mix the responsibility that our culture has in shaping the psyches of these same parents.

A patient of mine described a conversation that his parents had just prior to their marriage in the late 1940s. His mother had been working at a bank, thorough enjoying her job and the independence and social contact that it brought her. But her own mother told her that after she married my patient's father, she needed to stop working and have him support her. She told her fiancée this in so many words. This father, however,

reported that his heart sank as he listened, as if a door had swung shut on his life. And, in fact, as this couple proceeded to have children, the mother became increasingly depressed and the father took to drinking. They were living the American dream but, psychologically, it had become a nightmare. And this nightmare was visited on the children who had to cope with neglect and guilt associated with having two miserable parents.

Understanding the interaction between private parenting and social expectations is crucial in my view. If we are interested in studying the effect of the outside world on private psychological experience, we need to look no further than how the psychologies of parents are shaped by their social roles and by cultural expectations. In other words, the world, the outside world is mediated through the psychology of parents. What seems so private is actually shaped by what is public. In this way, we extend our empathy to both parents and children, understanding both as victims of forces beyond their control.