

Dr. Kathy McGuire, Creative Edge Focusing, www.cefocusing.com

PARENTS MUST BE MIRRORS FOR THEIR CHILDREN

Building Self-Esteem: Youngsters need lots of praise and encouragement to develop a good image of themselves.

WE ALL KNOW the story of Narcissus, the youth so taken with his own reflection that he could not tear himself away from it and so starved beside the pool.

We know a lot of narcissistic people. They talk and talk about themselves, unable to listen to another. Or they are so busy beautifying their own body or house or car that they have little attention for anyone else. Or they dress up their child as an image of what they themselves wish they had become. They exhaust us with their selfishness.

We think of narcissists as being "full of themselves," but actually they are empty shells, desperately trying to fill a void inside. The psychological term is "narcissistically wounded." At the time in childhood when they were supposed to be the center of attention, much admired, they did not get "filled up" with reflected images of their wonderfulness. Throughout their lives, they then seek this affirmation from outside, having no positive self-image inside.

Especially from birth to 3, and actually extending through age 6 or 7, children are incapable of seeing something from the point of view of another. Simple experiments show that if you ask such children to draw a picture as it would be seen by someone standing at another viewpoint, they are unable to do so. They are "ego-centered."

Actually, it's not accurate to say a child is self-centered at the earliest ages. The infant is not aware of being a self at all. Self and other are all mixed up in one soup. "Mother's milk is my milk; mother's anxiety is my anxiety."

A separate self arises only as children are mirrored back to themselves by the surrounding environment. Mother does not come when called, and the infant begins to see her as a separate person. The crawler bumps into an immovable object and learns, "Oh, this is not me." But much of our mirroring comes from the words of our parents: "Oh, you're such a good walker. I see you're really trying! ...What a good idea! ...You're so nice to share. ..What a helpful boy. ..I'm so glad you're here. .. You're such a sweetie. ..I love you how you keep trying." I remember my child toddling into view, filled with pride in some small accomplishment, and I would simply say, much to his delight, "I see you!"

What you put into a child is exactly what you get back. Reflect to your child. "Oh, you're so cooperative. ..You're being so gentle with kitty ...What a good plan. .. You're really thinking!" and you get a cooperative, gentle child, confident in his or her ability to think and plan. Reflect to your child, "You're so stupid...How could you do that?...You're ugly. ..Who would want you? ...What a dumb thing to do," and you'll get a child who feels stupid and ugly, with no confidence, sure to fail and behave inappropriately.

The child filled to the brim with admiration in the early years has self-esteem overflowing and therefore is able to give to others. Self-confident, he or she can share the

limelight The child who was not admired spends a lifetime seeking attention, good or bad.

Reflective feedback needs to relate specifically to the behavior of your child. Be on the lookout for positive behavior and congratulate it. The reflection needs to be an accurate mirror, evidence that you see your child's uniqueness. Saying "You look like a model" to an ordinary child or "You're a great athlete" to one better at math than sports will never fool the child, who will realize, "You don't see me. You only see what you want to see," the parent's own narcissistic reflection.

Similarly, trying to make your child a great ballerina or a great football player to fulfill your own dream, when the child's talents and interests lie in a different direction, is an attempt to use your child as a reflection of yourself and leaves your child empty inside.

What gets in the way of giving reflective attention to your children? Your own wounded child inside who says jealously, "I never got any attention. Why should she or he? Pay attention to me! Me!"

Almost all of us have a narcissistically wounded child inside. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Our parents or grandparents grew up in large families, pools of farm laborers, extensions of their parents. It's only as families have gotten smaller that parents have had time to give attention to each unique child. None of us is filled up. We don't have to berate ourselves for being needy. But we can take steps to nurture ourselves so that we can turn our mirroring attention toward our children and break the cycle of narcissism.

Here are some steps you can take to "fill up" yourself:

1. Spend time each day doing something that lets you feel competent and good about yourself. Spend time nurturing yourself. Work toward having a minimum of four hours a day separate from your child, time to give attention to yourself and to have your competence reflected by friends or co-workers. Use extended family, start a baby-sitting cooperative, use the various relief nurseries, get a part-time job, and use preschool or day care. Even folding laundry or going grocery shopping by yourself can feel like luxurious time alone.
2. Couples arrange time to be together without your children, mirroring yourselves to each other.
3. Read books about the inner child (John Bradshaw's *Homecoming* is a good start) and do some of the exercises for nurturing your own inner child. Go to an inner child workshop. Learn to play.
4. Join a support group (Adult Children of Alcoholics, Birth To Three, etc.) where you can share your feelings and ideas with adults who can mirror you.
5. Get yourself reflected by other adults who can really see and appreciate you so that you can turn your parenting attention to reflecting the positive behavior of your child. It's never too late. I'm over 40 and would be delighted to have my parents say. "I see you!"
6. Visit Interest Area: Positive Parenting at Creative Edge Focusing™, www.cefocusing.com to join our e-discussion/ support group and find other projects.