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## EMPOWERING FROM DEPENDENCE TO INDEPENDENCE

**You are born a dependent person!** For the next 20 years or more, you will be in a constant struggle with yourself and others to become independent. How well you make this transition, if you ever do, will depend on how you do it.

Fighting over the discipline of children has brought many families to the brink of disaster. Discipline is equated to keeping children safe. To keep children safe means keeping them dependent on their parents and guardians. The role of the parents is to gradually give children more independence as they grow older.

How much independence and how fast becomes a three-way battle between the parents and the child. “He is too hard on the children.” “But I’ve got to protect the kids from him; I wouldn’t have to protect them if he wasn’t so strict.” “She is too lenient and lets them get away with everything.” The child is often caught in the middle and learns to manipulate the parents.

The real victims of this conflict will ultimately be the children. Even though both parents agree that the kids are the victims of their behavior, they can not agree as to who should be in charge of the discipline. There is an old African saying, “When the elephants fight, it is the grass that gets killed.”

This process is **not** empowerment. For the sake of the children, it is time to quit debating who it is right and who is wrong and to do something different. Difference starts with **what is the role or purpose of a parent?** Is the role of a parent to take care, protect, and rescue our children? Yes, a parent needs to protect a baby. Babies need nurturing and protection. Teenagers do not need the same level of care, protection and rescuing.

To be an empowerer, parents first need to empower themselves; dependent parents will produce dependent children. Growing children need parents who will empower them, so that they may go from being dependent to being independent.

Empowering parents ask each other, “What do we want our children to be like when they’re 21? Do we want them to be dependent, conforming, immature, needy, disrespectful of others, and careless? (Young children are often all of these.) OR, independent, creative, respectful, innovative, self-disciplined, loving, responsible and dependable? What kind of an adult do we want them to become?”

It is much easier to get agreement regarding long-term goals than it is to get agreement on how to get our children to reach those goals. For example, between independence and dependence, who would not want a child who becomes independent? Or, would you prefer a child who will not leave home at 38?

Parents need to spend time discussing other qualities or characteristics that have high priorities for them. What are your long-term goals for your children?

Once this had been discussed, and you agree on how you want your children to be as adults, look at how you are disciplining the children. Is what you are saying and doing teaching them to become the type of person you want. While doing this, ask yourself,

- “What am I teaching my children when: I yell at my children? Vs. When I never yell at them?
- What am I teaching when I protect them from the consequences of their behaviors? Vs. When I allow them the consequences of what they have done?
- What are our children learning when we are fighting in front of them? Vs. When they never see us fight?” What are the children learning? That parents never fight?

Are you teaching realistic behaviors? If a child is never yelled at, how will the adult respond when their boss yells at them? If a child is protected from the consequences of their behavior, how will the adult deal with the consequences of their behavior? If you never fight in front of your children, how are they going to confront strong emotions in their mate? Discuss your behaviors towards each other and towards the children in terms of what your behaviors are teaching the children. By doing this, agreement on alternative parenting ideas comes much easier.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the long-term goals that most parents choose for their children is that of independence. Let me expand upon this concept. For years, both Government and privately funded researchers did a lot of investigation into what made up the “dependent personality.” Thousands of dollars of research money were spent in search of answers. Nothing specific was found and the answers that were found proved to be confusing and contradictory. Then somebody pointed out that the researchers had been asking the wrong question. The question was not what makes a person dependent, we are born dependent!

The question should have been, “What makes a person independent?” What does a person have to learn to grow from a state of dependence to a state of independence? Once the question was changed, the focus was switched to the process of becoming independent, and the findings now made this sense. I would like to share with you the results of that research on how to empower yourself and the ones you love, how to go from dependence to independence.

**Four Beliefs for Independence.** There are four beliefs which someone must have to grow from dependence, the natural state, to independence, the desired state. To the degree that you do not have these four beliefs, you will remain dependent. This is true whether you are a child or an adult, whether you are drug dependent, alcohol dependent, gang dependent, welfare dependent or whether you are a passive and abused wife who is afraid that she cannot make it on her own. Dependency comes in many forms and many stages. The dependent individual always lacks one or a combination of these four beliefs.

**The First Belief** that we must have to go from dependence to independence is that I AM CAPABLE. I can solve problems. I can go out and face the world. I can create new relationships. I am capable of holding a job. I am capable of learning and studying. I am capable of taking care of myself without drugs or alcohol.

There are many ways in which our parents have sabotaged us in the past and now we sabotage our children so that they don't learn that they are capable. Some of these ways are very crude, destructive, and obvious. Others are more subtle and harder to recognize for what they are. The obvious can be seen in the parent who berates his child by using putdowns, "You're stupid," "You're lazy," "You're irresponsible." These putdowns give children a clear message that they are not capable. What can a "stupid" person be, but stupid? What can a "lazy" person be, but lazy? The parent is telling his child, "You are not capable of taking care of yourself." Name-calling and labeling children and adults are deadly and can create the illusion of powerlessness and the inability to make it on one's own.

It is crucial to judge only a child's behavior, not the child. When he hits his sister, you tell him that it was not a good thing to do, "People are not for hitting." His behavior may be unacceptable, but that does not make him a bad person. Making a distinction between the behavior and the person is crucial. **Then, give the child acceptable ways of expressing his/her feelings.**

Another, more subtle, way that we teach our children (and each other) that they are not capable is by giving answers to questions that they could figure out for themselves. Instead, allow them the opportunity to try to figure out the answers. The solutions that parents usually give are: "you shoulds." You shoulds are just a sneakier way to provide an answer camouflaged as a question, "Why didn't you ask for help?" What the brain hears is "you should have asked for help." More examples, "Why did you hit your brother?" This is a statement, not a question. "You should not have hit your brother."

"Why do you keep showing up late for work? What is the statement here? The answers that you get from why questions are often defensive and blame others.

If you are going to ask questions or give answers, here are some better ways of responding that give the message that you are capable:

How is that working for you?

That is a hard way to learn.

I think I would have felt like dying if that had happened to me.

How do you think you could do it differently?

Is what you are doing getting you what you want?

An independent person is an empowered person. Being an empowered person does not solve your problems! Empowerment gives you the knowledge that you are capable of making mistakes and learning from them. Being empowered allows you to learn that emotional pain is not terminal. And, you are an

extraordinarily strong person to be able to hurt so much emotionally that you hurt physically and come through it even stronger. Instead of saying, “I can never stand to be hurt that way again,” it is now, “If I could go through that kind of pain once and survive it, then I could do it again if I had to. I am a strong person.”

Still another way to keep our children and ourselves from developing into capable people is by rescuing them. Do you rush to break up sibling fights? When any little thing goes wrong at school, do you rush over, confront the teacher, and solve the child’s problems for him. What you are teaching is, “You are unable to solve your own conflicts, and mommy is the one who can fix it for you.” In this way, he learns to remain dependent upon the parent for any problem solving, and the message the child gets is that he is not capable. As adults, these children now expect mom and dad to fix the world for them, to buy them a new car after wrecking the old one, to bail them out of jail, to raise grandkids for them, etc.

Also another way in which we keep our children dependent is that we will often redo the things that the child has already done. We tell the child to make his bed, but then we go back when the child is not around and remake the bed because it was not made perfectly. If you were raised by or married to a perfectionist, you soon learn that nothing is ever good enough. Everything I do is going to be done over, so why should I try to do anything? An A is not good enough; it should have been an A+. “No matter what, I’m not capable. I can’t do it right.”

The idea of not being capable, planted in childhood, carries over into adult life. Drug dependency or alcohol dependency, welfare dependency, and husband/wife dependency is related to both the dependent belief “I am not capable of doing it by myself,” and also to the belief, “I am not valuable because I need a crutch.” The chain of thought is: “I’m not good with people. I need some alcohol to talk to people, loosen me up, and get me through the workday or the social evening. I can’t do it by myself. Therefore, I’m not a complete or valuable person.”

The belief that one is independent and capable contrasts sharply with the beliefs that many adults bring into their marriages. You will often hear people say, “I need my wife,” or “I need my husband.” You need air, you need water, you need food, but you do not need a wife, you do not need a husband. *You want them.* If your spouse should die today, would you cease to live? No, it would be difficult, and there would be a lot of grief, anger, and depression, but you could make it, you would keep going. It is essential to become clear about what your needs are and what your wants are.

When you realize “I am capable,” the emphasis is on two words: “I” and “capable.” When you see that you have power in your life and can take care of yourself without crutches, you are empowered. *“I don’t need you to do it for me, though it’s nice if you want to. I am CAPABLE.”*

**The second belief** necessary for growth from the natural state of dependence to the empowered state of independence is, THERE IS CAUSE AND EFFECT IN MY LIFE. This is the belief that you are responsible for creating all of the consequences that happen to you. A lot of young people truly do not understand that it is their behavior, their attitude in the classroom, that gets them kicked out of school. It

is easier to blame the teacher, “The teacher kicked me out;” or classmates, “Johnny made me angry. He stuck his tongue out at me, and it’s his fault that I’m in trouble.” If someone or something can ruin your day or make you angry, then who has the power? Blaming others or looking for a scapegoat is a way of avoiding the reality that there is cause and effect in your life.

Whether you blame it on alcohol, drugs, other people, or something else, the result is the same—you will feel powerless. “I drink because my wife nags me (she is doing it to me).” You will continue to feel this powerlessness until you are ready to take responsibility for your irresponsibility. “I drink because I want to be an alcoholic.” “I treat my wife the way I do because I want a divorce.” “I continue to mess up at work because I want the boss to fire me.” If the alcohol, the wife, children, or the boss is doing it to you, you will stay powerless and dependent. **Give something a reason to exist, and it will persist.**

The best news I can give you is that you don’t have a single problem that you didn’t create. And since you created your problems, you can change them—you are no longer powerless! If you choose to believe that someone or something else is “doing it to you,” you will remain powerless and dependent all your life. You will stay “stuck” in dependency. . . Husbands do what husbands do; brothers do what brothers do; wives do what wives do, but you choose how you react to their behaviors. If you see yourself as part of the problem, you can be part of the solution. While you are powerless to change others, *you are powerful to change yourself*, and when you change, invariably those around you will change. At that point, you decide to be an actor instead of a re-actor.

Parents inadvertently teach children that there is no cause and effect in their lives by not following through with what they say. “You do that one more time and you’re going to your room.... “One more time and you’re going to get it...” Sometimes it’s the third “one more time,” and sometimes it’s the tenth “one more time.” Finally, when you explode, the child learns, “It is not what I am doing that gets me into trouble, it’s when Daddy has had it up to here that I get punished. It doesn’t matter what I do. I’m just the victim of others.” Unless you can see that you are creating the consequences in your own life and start taking responsibility for them, you will remain a dependent person.

**The third belief** necessary to become empowered is the belief that I MAKE A DIFFERENCE; therefore, I am important to my parents, brothers, and sisters, to my school. What I do affects others. I have valuable input to give; I will be listened to, and my ideas will be considered. When you don’t believe that you make a difference, you again will feel powerless and unimportant. Moreover, when you feel worthless, you will begin to believe that you cannot take care of yourself, and you need to be taken care of by others. You must believe that you make a difference, that people respond to you, respect you, and listen to what you have to say. People who do not think that they make a difference will not bother to vote.

This third belief gives you personal power. This is different from position power. A leader or supervisor may have position power but might have absolutely no personal power. The only way he can get things done is by ordering, threatening, or demanding. You need to be able to see that you are valuable and have the power to influence people around you because you make a difference.

One of the techniques that my wife and I used to teach this concept to Darren was to bring him into problem-solving matters in which his ideas and thoughts were considered equal with our own. That does not mean that he got his way every time. Sometimes, after we listened to him, we decided that his ideas were the ones the family would follow, sometimes not. But everyone had input. Years ago, we were going to bring Grandmother down from Oregon to visit us. It didn't matter to my wife and I whether she came for Christmas vacation or Thanksgiving vacation. We thought that this would be an excellent opportunity for Darren to make a decision. He thought about the choices he had and said, with a considerable amount of wisdom, "I think it would be better if she came down at Christmas time because we would have more time with her." That made a lot of sense to all of us and Darren could see that he made a difference in his own life and in the family.

**The fourth belief** necessary to be fully empowered is I CAN TOLERATE AND ACCEPT DELAYED GRATIFICATION. As you look around, you see people from all walks of life and all ages having trouble dealing with delayed gratification. It might be a thirteen-year-old who is considering having sex with her boyfriend or the thirty-year-old who is overspending. "Charge now and pay later," is too often the American way. It is the absence of being able to accept delayed gratification.

A few years ago, I read about some wonderful research done with a group of four-year-old children. The researchers offered these children the choice of either getting three little animal cookies right away or waiting fifteen minutes and getting three big pretzels. At any time before the fifteen minutes, the children were told they could press a buzzer, and they would get the three little cookies—but not the pretzels. Some were able to wait; others were not. Ten years later, the researchers tested these same children again. The children who initially could tolerate the wait for the big pretzels, had developed a higher I.Q., were better liked by both their peers and their teachers, had more "things" for which they had saved and worked, and were judged to be happier and better adjusted than the kids who "couldn't" wait.

One of the ways in which my wife and I taught our son to accept delayed gratification was to buy one of those clear plastic banks where the coins roll down and fall into stacks. We started giving him an allowance when he was about four years old. He received four quarters each week, two quarters he could spend, while the other two quarters had to be saved in the plastic bank. When the bank had ten dollars in it, Darren could take it to Toys Are Us and buy anything he wanted for ten dollars. As he got older, the 50/50 split remained, but the amount that had to be saved before he could spend it got larger. By the time Darren became a teenager, he had to save \$100 before he could spend it. With his \$100, he was able to buy an early model computer.

As you re-evaluate your parenting attitudes and ideas, it is important to look at what you are teaching your children by your behaviors and responses. You are always teaching, no matter what you do or do not do. Are you teaching them what you want them to learn? Are you empowering them or enabling them? Are they learning to remain dependent upon others, or are they learning to be independent? Are they learning that they are CAPABLE of solving their problems and figuring out and to handle their life? Are they learning that there is CAUSE AND EFFECT in their lives, that they can avoid fights, or create fights and

face the consequences? Are they learning that they MAKE A DIFFERENCE in their own lives and the lives of those around them? Are they learning that they CAN WAIT FOR WHAT THEY WANT until the time is right?

The final question that all parents and non-parents should be asking is, “Is what I am doing getting me what I want in the long run?” If what you are doing is getting you what you want in the long run, it will empower adults and children alike. And, you both will undoubtedly be working together to provide the appropriate discipline and responses.

Co-dependency, enabling, and rescuing teach people that they are victims and are not capable, that they need to be rescued. It teaches that there is no cause and effect because someone will rescue them. It teaches that you do not make a difference because no matter how hard you try, you will fail (and someone will have to rescue you).

Much of what some people call “nurturing” is nothing but co-dependency, rescuing, enabling, and protecting others from the consequences of their behaviors. Are you this kind of nurturer? Look at your interactions with others; what are you teaching the ones you love?

## **Keys to Empowerment**

A quick review: For our own and our children’s sake, the purpose of every woman and every man needs to be to EMPOWER YOURSELF AND TO EMPOWER THE ONES YOU LOVE. Violence comes from feeling powerless. Empowering teaches how to be powerful without violence. It teaches:

- 1) That you are capable,
- 2) There is cause and effect,
- 3) That you make a difference and
- 4) You can deal with delayed gratification.

**Whether you know it or not, you are powerful, powerful to change yourself, to take control of your life. Are you an empowered person? It will depend on what you believe about yourself and your world.**

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