

EMPOWERING PARENTS FROM DEPENDENCE TO INDEPENDENCE

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The purpose of a parent is to be an empowerer, one who empowers his/her children to go from being dependent, which is the natural state of the child, to being independent.

Fighting over the discipline of children has brought many families to the brink of disaster.

“But I’ve got to protect the kids from him; I wouldn’t have to protect them if he wasn’t so strict.”

The couple could not agree on what was strict, what was lenient, and what they should expect of their children. As a consequence, their children saw an opportunity to play one parent against the other. The real victims of this conflict would ultimately be the children. Even though both parents agreed that the kids were the victims of their behavior, they could 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 suffers.”

For the sake of the children, it was time to quit debating who was right and who was 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 your children? Yes, a parent needs to protect a baby. Babies need nurturing and protection. However, as the child grows, the focus needs to change to teaching the child that they are responsible to care for themselves, protect themselves, and learn that there are consequences to their behaviors. Empowering the child is the process that parents need to learn in order to raise healthy, independent adults.

I suggest that part of the problem in parenting comes when parents get stuck nurturing children who are no longer babies. Mothers who continue to focus on taking care of, protecting and rescuing children will over protect, enable, and not allow them the opportunity of learning from their mistakes. Fathers often see their purpose as providing financial support or buying them whatever they want. Both approaches produce children who are dependent, insecure, fearful, self-centered and as adults they become victims in their marriages, jobs and life.

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, which is the natural state of the baby/child, 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 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 wouldn’t want a child who becomes independent? Or, would you prefer one who still won’t 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, let’s take a look at how you are disciplining the children. Let’s see if the things you are saying and doing are teaching them to become the type of person you want. While doing this, ask yourself, “What am I teaching my children when: I yell? Don’t yell? Protect them from the consequences of their behaviors? Don’t protect them? When we are fighting in front of the children? What if they never see us fight? What are the children learning?” 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 make 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.

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 don’t have these four beliefs, you will remain dependent. This is true whether you’re 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 we were sabotaged by our parents 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 actually telling his child “You are not capable of taking care of yourself.” Name-calling and labeling of children and adults is deadly and can create the illusion of powerlessness and the inability to make it on one’s own.

It is important 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 doesn’t make him a bad person; making a distinction between the two is important. 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 confronting them instead of allowing them the opportunity to try to figure out the answers for themselves. These answers are usually given as “you should” or the more sneaky answer camouflaged as a question, “Why didn’t you ask for help?” Or “Why did you hit your brother?” (Meaning you should not have hit your brother!) By giving answers that the person already knows or could easily figure out for themselves, you are giving the message that they are not capable of figuring it out.

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?

Empowering people do not solve your problems! They guide you to the knowledge that you are capable of making mistakes and learning from them. Empowering people allow you learn that emotional pain is not terminal and you must be a very strong person to be able to hurt so much emotionally that you hurt physically. Instead of “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 in which we keep our children and ourselves from developing into capable people is by rescuing or being rescued. Do you rush in to breakup 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.” The child, in this way, 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.

Still 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 to do it by myself,” and to the belief, “I am not valuable because I need a crutch.” The chain of thought is: “I’m really not good with people. I need some alcohol to be able to talk to people, to loosen me up and to get me through the workday or through the social evening. I can’t do it by myself. Therefore, I’m not a complete or valuable person.”

The beliefs that one is independent and capable contrasts sharply with the beliefs which 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 don’t need a wife, you don’t 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 important to become clear on what are your needs and what are your wants.

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, then 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 which is 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 lives.

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 the 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.” As long as 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 own 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 remain “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 totally powerless to change others, *you are totally powerful to change yourself* and, when you change, invariably, those around you will change. You make the decision to be an actor instead of a re-actor.

Often 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.” When finally 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 take 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 powerless, you will begin to believe that you cannot take care of yourself and you need to be taken care of by others. You must have the belief that you make a difference; that people respond to you, respect you and listen to what you have to say. People who do not believe 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 a 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 that you do 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 as equal with our own. That doesn’t 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 in 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,” too often is 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 prior to 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 originally 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 way 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 was allowed to spend, while the other two quarters had to be saved in the plastic bank. When the bank had ten dollars in it, Darren was allowed to 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, the amount he had to save before he could spend it was over one hundred dollars.

As you re-evaluate your parenting attitudes and ideas, it is so 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 that they can create fights and face the consequences? Are they learning that they MAKE A DIFFERENCE in their own life and in 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 you are doing getting you what you want in the long run?" If what you are doing is getting you what you want in the long run, it will be empowering to adults and children alike. And, you both will no doubt be working together to provide the appropriate discipline and responses that should be given to your child.

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 really 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?

A quick review: The purpose of every woman and every man should 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.

You are powerful; powerful to change yourself, to take control of your life.

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For more information and examples about empowering children and others, see M. K. Doc Downing's books: **PARENTING, THE EARLY YEARS; TAKING CONTROL OF YOUR LIFE** and **THE ANATOMY OF A VICTIM**.