

February 18, 2004

**Unraveling the Mysteries of Relationships:  
An Introduction to Imago Relationship Therapy:  
Healthy Partners, Healthy Children  
Part IV**

*It's the repetition of affirmations that leads to belief. And once that belief becomes a deep conviction, things begin to happen.*

--Claude M. Bristol

A few weeks ago, I wrote about the childhood development theory that provides part of the theoretical basis for Imago work. This knowledge of childhood development is a priceless tool for both nurturing our intimate relationships, and nurturing our children by helping them build self-esteem and emotional strength.

In Part II, I wrote of the period between 18 months and three years, in which the child needs his or her parents to let go and allow the child to explore, while also needing the parents or caretakers to consistently “be there” as the child returns for reassurance. The stage that follows, the time between age three and age six or seven, is the “mirroring” stage, one in which many persons first experience bruising of their self-esteem.

This is the time when children begin to pretend, to explore, and to exercise imagination. They are beginning to form an identity. Ideally, parents will simply mirror a child’s activities or fantasies and ideas. By “mirroring,” I mean simply reflecting back in words or actions what we see our children doing or saying—without any judgment or comment. Many of us have heard of young children being reprimanded or chided for not coloring within the lines or for pretending in a way different than what parents and teachers expect. Yet when we disparage children for exploring and savoring the fantastical world of childhood, we rob them of precious psychological resources.

If parents mirror little or not at all, a child feels invisible, while if a child is mirrored and affirmed selectively, she may feel shamed for those things which elicit negative mirroring. For example, when Carol and I were first married, I often felt that everything and everyone in the world was more important to her than I, and I felt strongly that she was neglecting me and our marriage. She, on the other hand, often felt shamed or negated by things that I said or did, usually to my complete surprise.

Through our Imago work we discovered why we did this “dance.” In my childhood home the message was clear that children were to “be seen and not heard.” Rarely did anyone pay much attention at all to what I was doing. It seemed in large part that I reared myself. Therefore, I grew up feeling invisible and discounted.

In contrast, Carol grew up in an extended Italian family in which she felt much love and affection. However, the family had pretty clearly defined norms of behavior. Consequently, they gave Carol no affirmation for her depth of thought and introspection, something they did not understand or particularly value, but rather affirmed only the behaviors they thought important. The result of this “selective mirroring,” in which she was mirrored or affirmed only for certain behavior, was that Carol was very vulnerable to being shamed, and could easily interpret innocent words or deeds as critical or shaming.

Armed with this information, I have consciously sought to choose words and deeds carefully so as not to shame Carol. In addition, I have learned to affirm her and mirror her life and work in a consistent and positive way, thereby helping to heal some of the childhood wound.

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She is much less vulnerable to shame now than in the early days of our marriage, and someday shame may be a distant memory. She, on the other hand, has sought to give me some of the desired attention, but yet also by affirmatively mirroring me and being my “cheerleader,” she has helped to heal a lot of the old feelings of invisibility. Rarely do I feel “neglected” in our marriage any longer.

Learning to mirror our children regularly will help them to develop strong self-esteem. If a child draws a dog that looks like a dinosaur, just mirror—“Oh, that’s an interesting dog. Tell me about him.” If the child loves ballet and you could care less, and wish she would spend more time on math and science, mirror—“I see you practice your dancing a lot. Tell me what you like about dancing.” Reflect what the child is doing with affirmation, not criticism

Even negative behaviors can be mirrored. “I see you are breaking your toy. Can you tell me about why you are doing that?” Socially unacceptable behaviors can be mirrored first, followed by conversation which helps the child know why they are not acceptable.

Absent serious pathology, children do what they do for some reason. If we can withhold judgment, mirror, and probe to understand our child’s world, we can help children to be healthy, responsible, emotionally mature adults, who will make great partners. They will believe in themselves, freeing them to nurture and believe in their partners, and to build relationships which are healthful and emotionally fulfilling.

*Please write with questions you have or with topic suggestions. The best sources of material for columns are real life*

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