

THE FRIGHTENED PARENT SYNDROME*

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Syndrome is a medical word used to indicate a collection of symptoms, which, taken together, present the picture of a given disorder.

What are the signs of the frightened parent syndrome?

The number of parental fears seems to increase dramatically as the child enters adolescence. It is as if the date upon which a child leaves his twelfth year is the occasion for ringing the alarm bell. All the difficulties of raising the child to this point are now accentuated.

The parent worries. The parent is more afraid.

Parents express fears that their teenager might start smoking or drinking. They fear that he will get in with the wrong crowd, misbehave in public, fail in school, not get into college. They fear that, if loaned the car, he will speed, have an accident, or go where he is not supposed to go.

Parents are afraid that their young people might join the militants. They are afraid of the political action they may take—afraid of the radical ideas they may support. Many parents are “absolutely scared to death” that their daughters might get pregnant or their sons father a child. But above all, parents today are terrified of the possibility that their children may use drugs.

In addition, there are less openly admitted fears. Fear of what the neighbors, or the boss, or the minister will think. “What kind of a parent will I look like if my teenager does this or that?” Before the teen years arrive, parents have a feeling that they still have a chance to correct faults—still have an opportunity to form and mold a child who will be a credit to them. During the teen years, as the child moves out further into community life, parents mistakenly assume even greater responsibility for the behavior of their young. They experience a tragic terror of loss of personal prestige (their mistaken concept of what it is to be a good and successful parent) if their teenager misbehaves.

And finally, there is the unrecognized but very real fear that we can no longer **control** our teenagers.

How does it come about that today’s parents have so many fears?

This syndrome is part of the total social disorder from which we all suffer: a cultural upheaval, an expansion in the basic concept of democracy. Humanity is moving into a new era in interpersonal relationships—moving away from the

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idea that one person has the right to lord it over another. Today, no one wants to be considered an underling. At the same time we have no training in how to treat each other as equals.

The idea that adult and child are social equals is terrifying to many parents. "If I am not superior to my child, I have no significance—no worth—no place in the family!" Perhaps the problem lies in our understanding of the word "equal."

In arithmetic, two plus two equals four. In other words, two plus two is the same as four. We have mistakenly applied this arithmetical concept of the word equal to its use in social context. Of course it is utter nonsense to say that an adult is the same as a poor man, a laborer is the same as the boss. And yet, each of these human beings, is in actuality, equal to all others. It is crucial for our times that we come to understand fully that social equality means that each has the right to determine for himself what he will do at any given moment and at the same time has the obligation to act in a manner which indicates concern for the welfare of others and that his actions are in harmony with the needs of the total situation. No one is obligated to be subservient to another. If anyone attempts to impose his will upon another the valance in interpersonal relationships topples into that of inequality; one person having the right to control the decision of another. This is intolerable in a social climate in which the deeper implications of democratization are fully sensed though not openly recognized. **Personal** authority must now yield to the authority of **reality**.

There has always been strife between youth and adults. But today, in this new social climate, youth dare to defy much more openly than in former times. Why is this? Today's young people have been sensitive to the change in social environment since early infancy. They refused, even as toddlers to be treated as lesser beings. Parents, wishing to avoid "traumatizing" their children became uncertain and, thereby, vulnerable to the onslaught of youth's desire for recognition of his rightful place. Without effective and proper guidance children have little knowledge of how to obtain recognition and an awareness of their value in socially meaningful ways. Through misinterpretation they find obstacles seemingly insurmountable and turn to the "useless side of life"⁽¹⁾ to find significance. To overpower the adult who tries to overpower him becomes a most significant value in a child's scheme of meeting life. On the other hand, parents are handicapped by the breakdown in effectiveness of traditional methods of child training. They lack knowledge of new methods which meet the requirements of the new social order. As a result, we have raised a generation of young tyrants who, without conscious awareness, sincerely believe that they have all the rights while the parents have all the responsibilities.

(1) Dreikurs, R. *Fundamentals of Adlerian Psychology*, Alfred Adler Institute, Chicago, Illinois. Copyright 1950 by Greenberg: Publisher, p. 24.

Parents resent being put into this role of underling to their children just as much as the young people resent being forced to comply with parental dictates. Parents attempt ineffectively to apply the old pressures which merely stimulate further rebellion. Young people dare to defy because they have found they can get by with it—and the adults don't know what to do.

In coping with the problems which our children present, we still attempt to use the autocratic methods by which we were raised. We fail to realize that we have lost the **right** to control. Furthermore, we have little training in the art of influencing and we have not developed skills needed for effective leadership. Finally, many of us labor under the archaic notion that we can find our own inner sense of significance if we can keep our children down in a position of **insignificance**. All too many times the youth who achieves distinction in some field is looked upon as a credit to **us**: as a reflection of how great **I** am! Since youth is no longer willing to be placed in this inferior position, they fight back. Unfortunately, without any recognition of what the problem is, young people who are treated as underlings use the same traditional methods to gain a better position by trying to push adults down. And so we have the so-called "War Between the Generations." Many very frightened parents do not even wish to admit that a state of warfare exists.

To remedy this cultural disorder of the frightened parent syndrome, we need to apply massive doses of Mutual Respect.

The meaning of the word "respect" depends upon how old one is. My generation grew up learning that respect meant to "look up to." In a society where no one wants to be an underling, it is impossible to continue to use this definition. Today each individual meets another on equal footing. Every living human being has his feet on the same earth. One may be taller than another, swifter, smarter, richer, more talented in a given direction, and so on. But in interpersonal relationships, we all stand on the same level simply because each of us has the same right to be self-determining and the same obligation to remain within the boundaries of social requirements—to follow what Adler calls the Logic of Social Living. Our whole democratic world needs to learn a new approach to interpersonal relationships. We need to learn how to respect ourselves and how to respect the other person.

This is an extremely difficult assignment, since few adults really do respect themselves. From our cultural inheritance, we have acquired little knowledge of our own basic value. We labor under the idea that we can respect ourselves only if others respect us—that is, if others look up to us in some manner. And so we measure our worth by what others think. We gain status by fictive standards of wealth, position, education, achievements, and so on. We fail to realize that we can respect ourselves merely because we are alive, because we function, because we are human. Lacking this sense of self-respect, we feel intensely discouraged when our children get the better of us—seem to defeat us at every turn. In our efforts to regain our own false sense of self-respect, we set about autocratically to push them down so that we can again be on top. We look down upon our

children. As they grow into adolescence they become more of a threat to us. We then apply more and more pressure to “keep them in their places.” Thus, we add to their determination to resist being shoved into a position of “underling” and we cause the very thing we decry—their rebellion and lack of respect for us.

How, then, can one apply massive doses of Mutual Respect?

We, as parents, need to study, to learn. We need to become aware of how we push others down and how we allow ourselves to be pushed down. We need to become alert to **interaction**. For example: Mother is exasperated at Mary’s concern with the latest fad in clothing. She flatly announces, “I am not buying you any more clothes this semester.” Presently Mary is beseeching in the most pitiful manner that something very special has come up which requires a special dress. Mother feels like a criminal if she refuses, so she gives in and buys the garment.

Now, what really happened in this interplay?

First, Mother shows a lack of respect for Mary by trying to control her through deciding for Mary what she will wear. She has also shown a lack of self-respect. Having made a decision not to buy any more clothes, she is unable to keep it in the face of Mary’s yearning. She feels so sorry for Mary.

Whenever we feel sorry for someone, we show disrespect—we look down upon them. We express the hidden feeling, “You are inadequate to meet your situation.” In turn, by implication, we place ourselves in a superior position—“I can do it for you.” When mother feels sorry for Mary she contributes to her daughter’s lack of respect for herself. Mary places herself into this inferior position of being pitiful because it serves her purpose. Her bid for pity becomes a tool with which she can force Mother to give in, thereby showing disrespect for Mother and gaining a superior position. The teeter-totter action continues. Mother, lacking respect for herself and depending upon the good opinion of others, is afraid of losing Mary’s approval. She wants to be looked upon as a “good” mother. Mary senses Mother’s fear and utilizes it to gain her own ends. Mary can gain superiority by looking down on Mother whom she can “wrap around her finger.” Both are unknowingly cooperating with each other to maintain a poorly balanced relationship.

What would happen if Mutual Respect were applied?

First, if Mother had respect for herself, she would not need to lay down the law because she wouldn’t feel afraid of Mary’s opinion. Mother has the power to decide what **she** will do, but lacks the power (or right) to decide what Mary will do. Mary and Mother can explore together the problem of clothes. The girl is allowed to express every idea and feeling she has about the problem and is listened to attentively. Mother then asks how Mary feels the problem of clothes budget can be solved and still remain within the family economic limits. Eventually, they arrive at an agreement based upon the realities of the situation rather than upon what Mother has decided Mary shall be made to do. In such a

manner, Mother takes Mary into partnership which is the most needed skill in our homes today. Then, when her daughter runs out of money and pleads for something special, Mother is in a position to show self-respect by not submitting to the undue demand. At the same time, she can show respect for Mary by acknowledging her dilemma and expressing her confidence in Mary's ability to learn how to handle her own affairs.

Our children need our help and guidance in learning how to respect themselves and to respect us. They ask for information. We give them platitudes and moralistic lectures. It is our obligation to help our young people learn how to decide for themselves. We need to learn how to take them into partnership with us; to sit down with them and discuss difficulties or problems from the viewpoint of **what the situation needs** rather than, "How can I get my own way?"

Let us take the problem of smoking for example. Suppose both parents feel very strongly that smoking is detrimental and so they decide that their son is not going to be allowed to smoke. This decision is a red flag to the boy. "My folks aren't going to tell me what to do." And so he starts smoking at school and eventually may defy his parents and smoke at home.

Suppose, however, that the parents apply massive doses of mutual respect. First, they recognize their own right to decide for themselves that they will not smoke. They explore the situation with their son. Such a discussion starts with questions. "What do you feel are the advantages of smoking?" If there is any kind of a good relationship, the boy must be encouraged to give his ideas. "It shows you're grown up." "You are 'in' with your crowd." "It relaxes you—gives your hands something to do when you're nervous." These ideas must be respected—that is, **accepted** as his point of view. No attempt should be made to "correct" his ideas. The parents then pursue the question by exploring the disadvantages. Young people hear plenty about this! They can give the answers. But the kicks of beating the system, the excitement of taking a chance, the game of defeating adults may well outweigh good sense when parental pressure is applied. Finally, the decision to smoke or not is handed over to the boy. "You know how we feel about smoking. But it will have to be your decision. The choice to smoke or not is up to you. You can even choose to let your friends run your life by persuading you to smoke if you want to. In this regard, my only question would be, 'Is this really inner freedom?' If you decide to smoke, there is nothing we can do about it. We have to accept your decisions."

Such an approach shows mutual respect and is much more likely to win cooperation. The parent who feels all tight inside at this suggested approach is one who is involved in the futile and hopeless task of attempting to

control—attempting to force the teenager to follow parental values and concepts.

The same sort of discussion can be conducted in the matters of drugs and sex. Our young people cry out, “Give us the **facts** on **both** sides. Let us choose.” Scare tactics only infuriate teenagers.

For example: We have evidence on all sides that they, having experimented with marijuana, know more about it than adults. There has been no accurate and thorough research into the effects of smoking this weed. The derision of youth at certain anti-drug programs offered in school is more realistic than the adult approach, “Thou shalt not because I say so, and if you do, this is how you will be punished.” Parents need to take their young people into partnership. “Let us explore the problem together. How does it look from your point of view? What do you gain? What do you lose? For what possible purpose can one act in this way?”

I have several times conducted such a discussion with groups of teenagers from 14 up on the matter of sex. The kids know the answers. If young people feel adults are sincere and that they are not in for a moral lecture, they will give answers. “To show you are grown up.” “To find out what it is like.” “Kicks” (Easy pleasure). “To get even with parents,” and so on. These answers all come under the heading of advantages. They know only too well the disadvantages from the adult point of view. No girl cares to hear from her mother a long sermon on how boys will not respect her if she is wanton. It only makes her mad. “Get off my back.” A young person’s hidden purposes for his behavior cannot be reached through “logic” or sermonizing. Such a girl may possibly be seeking approval, or popularity, or status among her peers. She may desire to prove she is female and can function in this role. She may even hope to get even with her parents who dominate by doing that which the parents consider the very worst thing to do. Preaching merely pushes her further into rebellion.

It is futile to try to teach our children respect for themselves by downgrading their attempts to find their place among their peers. They need our respect for their right to choose. They need our guidance in the form of unpressured searching together. They desperately need for us to LISTEN—for us to abandon the critical approach—“You don’t know what you are talking about. You just listen to me. I know better.”

We need to become aware of the fantastic number of ways we all have of pushing each other down. A favorite method to get on top of any unyielding teenager is to say, “When I was your age...” How they hate it! The unrecognized intent of this remark is to convey the message. “Look at what I overcame. I am a hero.” The youth hears this, and also the implication, “You are a weakling.”

There is much written today about the effects upon young people from our affluent society. Our money and possessions are another means we can use to push our teenagers down. Many young people have been raised to feel that each has a right to have whatever he wants. This has to come about through another mistaken concept of how to be an overlord. Since we have much and they, being children, have nothing, we become great and grand when we give them all the things we lacked as children. Then, to make the distinction even more clear, we indicate to them that they had jolly well better stay in the position of underling by manifesting gratitude! Can one wonder that youth is rejecting materialism as a goal toward which to strive?

Our fears will diminish as we learn how to reexamine our concepts of respect and to help our young people examine theirs. The individual parent can do little with a completely rebellious teenager. The influence of his peers far outweighs that of his parents. Yet, in our own homes, we certainly can work for improvement in the relationship between ourselves and our teenagers.

Finally, we can act upon the plea of a high school senior who said, "We want to be treated like a young person, not just a young."