

Breaking the Cycle of Destructive Parenting



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"Insight for the Young and Unrestrained" is an original weekly column appearing every Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Gregory V. Diehl. Gregory is a writer, musician, educator, and coach for young people at EnabledYouth.com. Archived columns can be found [here](#). IYU-only RSS feed available [here](#).

Adulthood does not come suddenly upon a person. Contrary to legal precedent, one does not go to bed a mere reckless youth one night and wake up mature and accountable for their own lives and actions the next day. It's a process, like anything else, that happens in linear and non-linear stages for both the body and mind. With regard to the body, it might most basically come down to sexual maturity and the ability to reproduce. By this standard, most people are adults by age 13. The marker of peak physical maturity in other regards happens a little later, around 21 for women and 25 for men. Our bodies and brains continue to grow and generally max out around these ages, then begin the slow decline into old age as structure is lost more quickly than it is gained. All this happens more or less autonomously as different functions of our innate genes are unlocked in sequence, so long as healthy conditions are maintained. And so many narrowly-minded people contend that there is a little more a "boy" must do to become a "man" than to merely survive some two and a half decades in adequate health.

But as human culture has so amply demonstrated, the psychological development of a person is not always so conveniently automated. Who we are internally becomes shaped by the experiences we have during these first decades of life. We learn how the world works, and most importantly how people work, from the time of our very first interactions with other humans. We entrust, without choice on the matter, our parents with the burden of not only keeping us alive but with preparing us for life. Preparation for life means both external and internal education. This means learning the ways of the world, including how to ensure our own survival without their help and how to build healthy friendships and romantic relationships with other people. They educate us internally too, by teaching us to express our emotions and feel comfortable being ourselves. If the natural role of a good parent could be sufficiently expressed in a single statement, it would be "to promote the independent functioning and self-actualization of the offspring".

Taking on this parental mission statement requires you to have first achieved self-actualization yourself. Independence cannot be taught by someone who still blames the world for his problems or expects someone in higher authority to solve them for him. Emotional maturity cannot be demonstrated by someone who remains quick to lash out in anger and annoyance. Healthy romantic intimacy and bonding cannot be shown by a mother and father who so easily separate at the first sign of trouble, or perhaps worse, stay together despite mutual contempt or apathy toward each other. Resourcefulness and adaptability cannot be taught by a leech who still feeds off the system and refuses to learn the skills necessary to make it in the world. The likelihood is rather overwhelming that should a person reproduce prior to attaining these important milestones in life that their children will also fail to attain them. Consequently, we have become a world primarily composed of children raising children.

This is not universally true, of course. Everyone seems to know that one family who inexplicably seems to have figured it all out. They are comfortably wealthy without sacrificing too much time away from family affairs. The siblings all get along and support each other. They respect and obey their parents when a sensible request is made, and the parents actually engage in open discussion when challenged by their offspring, instead of chalking it up to “because I said so” or the threat of punishment. They attend a prestigious private school, or are homeschooled, and genuinely enjoy the learning process because the natural excitement for discovery hasn’t been violently badgered out of them. Mom and Dad embody the respective strengths of masculinity and femininity to the fullest, with each relying on the reciprocal strength of the other for maximum effectiveness. They create an irreversible imprint in the minds of their children of how a healthy romantic partnership can be so that the boys won’t go about seeking abusive dominance over their future girlfriends, nor will the girls ever seek to fill the void left by an absent unloving daddy with sexual attention from men.

Just as well, it is fallacious to assume that self-actualized parenting will necessarily result in a successfully self-actualized child. The best parents in the world still must compete with the rest of the social influences in a child’s life, and attempting to remain the dominant figurehead in a world of Socialized schooling, inane media noise, and the complete weirdos and losers who seem to populate most of the planet is a tall order for anyone. Damage to the developing psyche of an innocent and vulnerable youngster is inevitable, so the greatest parents in the world have to take additional steps toward defending against the poison which fills the emotional spectrum of the world and in helping the child recover from unavoidable trauma. Being a good parent in no way guarantees the ability of the child to replicate such success.

Sometimes though, a person can come from the worst of starting conditions and over the course of his or her life manage to turn it all around and reach total adulthood maturity in

spite of, not because of, their parents and various childhood afflictions. There is a tiny, but growing, minority of people whose pain in childhood and adolescence somehow became the fuel they needed to propel themselves into the responsibility and empowerment of adulthood. These are the stories that make the most compelling and inspiring biographies and documentaries. Few of us will have really started from rock bottom and ultimate hardship, but many of us, probably almost all of us, will have had inadequate parents and upbringings in one way or another. Because of this, we face a crossroads: either learn from the mistakes of the past or repeat them with our own children and continue the cycle of destruction one generation further.

Only an individual can make the choice to be one of the brave who breaks the cycle of imbalance passed down from parent to offspring. If you were denied the parents you needed, the parents you deserved, you are not alone. No one can undo the damage they cast upon you by not being ready to have and raise you. But their mistakes don't have to carry over. Just as we all inherit the worst aspects and character flaws of the ones who came before us, we too inherit the greatest untapped strengths and virtues that they may never even have come to show us. We can spend our whole lives hating our parents, and even hating ourselves for the parts of them we see in us. But we can also dig deeper and see the people our parents could have been, the best possible versions of them at their peak potentials, and we can work to become more like that.

The perspective of an outside observer allows little glimpses of all the things that are unique and great about us originating in our parents. We can't entirely blame them for becoming the people they did and stopping at the level of development they grew content with. However, we can hold them accountable for bringing children into the world and not preparing them for life within it, not giving them the support they needed to become the best versions of themselves, and not teaching them what they would need to become fantastic parents to their own kids someday. You have learned these things through whatever other positive influences you can scrape together. Know that anything left uncleared from your past will sooner or later show up in how you parent others, so by denying the truth you are only delaying the inevitable. If you already have children, then surely you have seen by now how much presence of mind and assuredness of self it takes to be the person they need you to be 24 hours a day. Know that the destructive cycle can end with you, and will not, except through circumstances beyond your control, be carried on to your own kids.