



COPE READING SESSION SEVEN

WHAT IS RIGHT FOR THE CHILDREN?

FOCUS ON YOUR CHILDREN'S NEEDS

Welcome to your last module in the COPE program. We have talked about many skills to help you reign in your emotions, develop a healthy attitude about working with the other parent, and solving problems. Now it is time to turn our attention to your children and to define what things you can be doing to be the best parent you can be. I mentioned in the first module that how you are functioning as parent and how well you do shielding your kids from children will impact your child's long-term emotional development and stability. These two areas of parental behavior have a bigger impact upon your children than all the other dimensions of divorce and co-parenting do combined. This is why it is important that you find some ways to continue the process of growth that you have started in COPE and keep growing as person who is emotionally stable, healthy in mind, and behavior.

Many parents at this point in the program will look back on how they have been handling this conflict with the other parent and feel ashamed and guilty their part in the conflict. If you feel some of this, I want you to know that this is healthy to feel some guilt when you recognize that you have been off course. However, all people make mistakes. Try to forgive yourself and the other parent. Concentrate on using the skills you have learned, and simply do the best you can to raise your children well. Never view yourself as a failure. You will only make life much more difficult for yourself and your children.

DON'T LEAN ON THE KIDS EMOTIONALLY

It is not abnormal to feel emotionally out of sorts during a conflict that seems to drag on and on. The stress of it can be exhausting and some parents feel traumatized and need help. However, you should deal with your emotional turmoil OUTSIDE of your home and away from your children. Do not use the children to meet your emotional needs or as a replacement for your partner. Do not discuss any problems regarding the children's other parent whether speaking to them or to someone else. Even if your children are mature, this is extremely harmful.

Work to develop new activities and hobbies that will contribute to rebuilding your self-esteem. It is recommended that you seek support from friends, therapists, ministers, and other parents in similar situations. Learn to separate your own issues about the other parent from parenting issues. But again, let your kids be kids. You are adult who can figure out their own issues and problems. Although your child may appear to have is all together and be a willing listener, it is too much to ask that they think about adult problems. Your children

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need to know you are there for them and that you have their life and your own in hand. If you are overwhelmed, confused, angry or afraid, get help from another adult. Children cannot take care of themselves and they are not there to take care of you either.

Children should not have to make decisions about with whom they should live. Asking them to choose creates enormous guilt, anxiety, anger, and fear. In fact, in California, children are not legally allowed to choose with which parent they want to live. This decision can only be made by parents or judicial officers, but not by the child.

PUT THE CHILD'S INTEREST BEFORE YOUR OWN

The relationship you are having with your children is the ONLY relationship in the world that you should think of someone else's interest before your own. Adults should not put themselves second to any other adult, but when it comes to your children, you should not be first. Develop a time-share plan appropriate to your children's ages and developmental stages. Within the structure of this plan, recognize that special circumstances will arise, which will require flexibility. Make adjustments that fit the children's needs. This may mean extra phone calls or visits if a child is especially anxious about being separated from the absent parent. Time sharing arrangements may need to change as your children grow and as each child's developmental needs change.

Accept the fact that, in order to meet your child's needs, parents may not be treated fairly. Each of you cannot have half of your child in terms of time, any more than you can have half of the child's body. Timesharing usually ends up being unbalanced with each parent feeling as if they lose something. One parent feels that he/she gets less overall or routine time with the child while the other feels he/she does not get enough "fun" or leisure time. Parents need to accept this inequality for the child to be healthy and happy; unequal timesharing is an unavoidable reality of the break up.

Remember that your children may have different temperaments, and these need to be considered. Some children adjust well to change, are easy going, and can move back and forth between parents and homes easily. Other children have a more difficult time with change and are slower to adjust. For these children, change creates so much anxiety that it often undermines the beneficial effects of more visitations, especially in younger children. As infants, children require frequent visits of shorter duration (for example, 4-5 times per week for 2-4 hours each time). For the toddler to older child who has trouble with change or travel, the transition to less frequent, longer visits should occur slowly. Never use a child's inability to adjust to changes well as an excuse to limit contact with the other parent. These are development issues that should be considered.

Again, the children's needs should take precedence over the parents' needs. Part of being a good parent involves putting your own needs aside and doing what is best for your children. Children need a strong relationship with both parents. Contact with each parent should be planned with all of the children's needs in mind.

FLEXIBILITY

One thing I like to remind parents is that there is no such thing as "your" time with the kids. Time you spend with the kids, is still the kid's time. It is their life and they need to be able to live their life based on what is important and of value to them. I take a dim view of parents who are unwilling to be flexible in terms of time the children spend with them. There will be events that the child will prefer to attend, instead of being with you from time to time. This includes family functions and important celebrations with the other parent's side of the family that may fall on your time. Don't make your kids miss out on slumber parties, special gatherings or fun activities just because it's "your time." Be flexible and be willing to give up some of your time when it is in the child's best interest. Your children love you and need time with you, but their life itself includes many

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interests and people. Please learn to accommodate these things and be fair to your children. Don't think of minutes and hours you get with the kids. Take a long range view of your relationship and be willing to step back to facilitate the child's life. Your kid's will appreciate you for this very much. They also will remember it if you are selfish and unbending causing them to lose out on things that are important to them.

SHIFT INTO A BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP

What does a business relationship look like? This is what you should be striving for with the other parent. You are in the business of raising children together. The other parent is your partner in this venture. We all know how to act like adults at work. We treat our co-workers and clients with courtesy and respect or we know we will eventually be fired and lose our income. We smile and greet others we do not like, we do not share our inner most thoughts and judgments of co-workers, we call when we will be late, we do not yell, or call others names, and we refrain from sending nasty emails or text messages. If we get off course and do something wrong, we apologize and correct our behavior. If you can do these things at work, you can do also do them in your co-parenting relationship.

BEHAVIORAL AND EMOTIONAL ISSUES CHILDREN HAVE WITH EXCHANGES

Children naturally have trouble making transitions, especially when the transition causes feelings of anxiety. Getting children accustomed to smooth exchanges takes time and effort, but eventually children learn what to expect. There are many reasons why children have trouble with exchanges. We will explore some of them here.

First of all, children do feel mixed loyalties and worry about pleasing you. These feelings may come from real or imagined concerns, however, these feelings can also be based on your conflict. All children want to please their parents. As an attempt to reduce parental conflict, it is not uncommon for children to demonstrate loyalty to the parent he/she is with at the time.

It is very common that children express dissatisfaction about the time spent with the other parent. Before assuming the worst remember that kids complain just like anybody else. They just want to be heard. Children might leave out significant parts of a story when giving details about an event at the other parent's home. Example: "Mommy wouldn't let me call you." Remember that children can manipulate. In this example, mommy would not let them call because it was one hour past bedtime. Children also feel angry often at their parents for disciplinary actions that had taken. It is common that kids will tell "poor me" stories to get attention and sympathy from other loved ones. In conflict situations, parents get so involved with their own issues related to the other parent that it is very easy for them to accept negative information about the other parent from their children without checking it out. Just remember, the child may be telling you what he/she thinks you want to hear. This is very common.

Children may also struggle with lack of control over what is happening in their family life. Young children may cry during, before, and after exchanges, and they may throw tantrums, hide, or express lack of interest in seeing the other parent. Older children get angry, verbalize anger and negativity, and sometimes will lock themselves in their rooms. Children are frequently tired and/or hungry. This can be another reaction to the excitement and anxiety of the exchange. Children almost always have difficulty with the separation and experience a loss every time they change houses. Common behaviors after the visit may include anger, irritability, tantrums, difficult behaviors, or bad moods. This is natural, as there is usually an adjustment period no matter how great things went at the other home. No matter what, you should keep an open mind and consider all kinds of reasons for the child's behavior. Don't rush to blame the other parent.

KEEP CHILDREN OUT OF THE MIDDLE

We have already talked about keeping your children out of the middle in COPE, but I will reiterate its importance again. Stop any of the following behaviors. They put children in the middle and can harm children emotionally.

1. Don't instruct the child to tell the other parent something.
 - Mother to child, "Tell your father I'm taking you to church this Easter."
 - Father to child, "Tell your mother she should not let her boyfriend stay overnight."
 - Mother to child, "Tell your father to buy you some new shoes this Saturday."
 - Father to child, "Tell your mother you want to come to my house this weekend, and I will take you bike riding."
2. Don't undermining the children's relationship with the other parent, overtly or covertly:
 - Father to child, "Your mother only has fun with you. I'm the parent who really takes care of you."
 - Mother to child, "Your father is selfish and lazy; he never thinks about what you want."
 - Father to child, "If your mother really cared about you, she wouldn't go out on dates."
 - Mother to child, "If your father loved you, he wouldn't let his girlfriend spend the night when you are there."
3. Don't triangle the children against the other parent:
 - Father to child, "I give your mother child support; that should pay for you playing soccer."
 - Mother to child, "You know, if your father paid his child support on time, I could get you a new coat for winter, and you could go to the movies with your friends."
 - Father to child, "Your mom got everything in the divorce; that is why we are too poor to have any fun. I don't even have enough money for food."
 - Mother to child, "If your father can afford to take his stepchildren to baseball games, he can afford to take you to Magic Mountain."
4. Don't quiz the children after visits:
 - Father to child, "Did your mother's boyfriend spend the night?"
 - Mother to child, "Did your father get drunk at his party?"
 - Father to child, "Did your mother say anything bad about me?"
5. Watch your body language:
 - "It's your mother." Father grimaces and hands the phone to the child.
 - "Your father is at the door." Mother sticks her tongue out at the partially opened door.
 - "Tell your mother goodbye." Father scowls at mother and crying child.
 - "Come kiss Mommy goodbye." Mother is frowning and holding onto child as child tries to go with Father.
6. Don't send the underlying message that the children are not okay/safe with the other parent (this is alienating behavior):
 - Mother to child, "Let us pray for your safety before you go with Daddy."
 - Father to child, "Call me as soon as you get there, or I will be worried."
 - Mother to child, "Now if Daddy drives funny, you call me, and I will call the police."
 - Father to child, "If Mommy has any bad men staying at her house, you call me, and I will come get you."

The above are very damaging to children and the co-parenting relationship. Eighty percent of all communication is non-verbal. Actions speak louder than words, and children are very good at picking up on subtle cues.

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EFFECTS OF ALIENATION ON CHILDREN

Pathological Parental alienation is abusive to children. This is according to researchers such as Fidler and Bala in 2010. Unfortunately this type of abuse is largely overlooked, according to Bernet, et al in 2010 who point out that child welfare professional and therapists are often unaware of it, or minimize its extensive damage. Please make no mistake. Alienation is serious and if it is uncovered by the judge in your case, it could have very severe consequences for you. Attorneys, therapists, and family court judges tend to take a dim view of such practice. I ask that you take a very good look at yourself if your children are refusing to see the other parent or are hostile towards them in general. What might be your part in the problem? What can you do to help your children have a better relationship with the other parent? Every child has a fundamental right and need for an unthreatened and loving relationship with both parents. To be denied that right by one parent, without sufficient justification for such is abusive. Simply put, *it is the child who is being violated by a parent's alienating behaviors.*

TALKING TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT THE OTHER PARENT

Obviously, parents should maintain a commitment to protect the children from any unnecessary stress and they should never indulge yourself in a discussion with your children about the other parent without first considering your motives. Be certain that such a conversation is necessary and appropriate. I strongly suggest that you first meet with a therapist who is knowledgeable about high conflict divorce before you even consider it.

Many parents try to rationalize their negative motives by making excuses such as “the kids need to know about their mother” or “I am just telling the truth about the situation.” This is not good enough logic. If any parent cannot be bothered to think in depth about such matters, then I would have to conclude that their motives are not good. Do not indulge your whims. Your children will likely be hurt rather than helped by anything you might say.

When to break the united front in co-parenting:

According to Dr. Warshak the “united front” approach to parenting is a good standard in parenting. The united front means that parents work together to discipline their children and support each other’s efforts to help the child grow and develop into responsible adults. Having said this however, there are rare instances where some parents hold this standard when their children could actually benefit from hearing some valid criticism delivered in a constructive manner. There are two times when not holding a united front in parenting might be the mark of good and decent parenting. The first time is when you are the target of malignant criticism, and the second is when the other parent behaves in ways that are confusing, upsetting and hurtful to the kids.

Notice here that I used the words “*might be the mark of good and decent parenting.*” Whether or not it is depends upon a careful assessment of the situation. If parents move too quickly in this area they could cause more damage to themselves than to the one they criticize. Be careful here. I actually recommend that you get help from a professional before you make any open criticism of the other parent if you are in litigation. However if you are concerned about something and are considering talking to your children about the other parent, do the necessary soul-searching for clarification first. These are the questions to ask yourself before you decide on what, if anything, to say, according to Warshak:

1. What is my motive for revealing this information to the children?
2. Are my children going to be harmed by the behavior I am critical of? Or are they going to be harmed by the information I am thinking about revealing to them?
3. How will it help the children to hear what I would like to tell them?

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4. What are the possible benefits to my children of learning about the information, and will these benefits outweigh the possible risks?
5. If I was still happily together with the other parent, and I wanted to protect my children's relationship with them, how would I handle the situation?

Let's apply these 5 questions to a real life problem to see how the "Warshak Test" can help us clarify what is best. We will use a common problem of one parent being chronically late to pick up the children. The children feel tense and wait by the door for dad. Mother is inconvenienced and wants to berate dad in front of the children by saying something like "your father is so irresponsible... you can never count on him..."

1. What is my motive for revealing this information to the children?
2. There are mixed motives in this case. Mother realizes that she is angry about the inconvenience dad's chronic tardiness creates for her but also, she feels bad about him disappointing the kids who are ready for dad to show up.
3. Are my children going to be harmed by the behavior I am critical of? Or are they going to be harmed by the information I am thinking about revealing to them?
4. Mother can say yes, the kids are being harmed by the constant disappointment of dad's tardiness and they are anxious if he will or will not actually show up. They might assume father is late because he doesn't care about them, which could hurt their self-esteem.
5. How will it help the children to hear what I would like to tell them?
6. It could help the kids place Dad's tardiness in its proper perspective so they do not blame themselves or see it as an indication of their worth to him.
7. What are the possible benefits to my children of learning about the information and will these benefits outweigh the possible risks?
8. The risks are that the children will be uncomfortable to hear mom criticize their father and her words could be more damaging to the children than dad's chronic tardiness is. At the same time she could say something that would help the kids cope with the situation and put it in the proper perspective. Regardless, she must choose her words carefully to be helpful. Declaring that the other parent is "irresponsible and someone of whom you can never count on" would not be the best way to go about it. Mom would need to keep in mind the child's age and then decide what and how to say it to be helpful to her children.
9. If I was still happily together with the other parent, and I wanted to protect my children's relationship with the other parent, how would I handle the situation?
10. This question forces mom to think about the best way to proceed. Since this is a chronic problem with the other parent, there is no good reason that mom should not handle the situation the same as she did in their relationship. Saying something like "Dad is usually late to pick you up. He loves his time with you but dad is often late for things that are important to him. A lot of people have this problem. Don't stand by the door waiting for him because he is likely to be late. Instead, find something to do while you wait. I am sure he will be here as soon as he can be." It also would not be wrong for the mom to encourage the kids to tell dad how they feel when he is late if they would like to.

Handling a situation such as this in a constructive manner deserves applause because this mother kept the best interests of her children in the forefront of her mind. She has every right to feel irritated and upset about dad's irresponsibility when being late to pick up the kids. Furthermore, he wastes her time when he is late. Of course, this discussion is not a justification of his behavior, but mom did not allow her frustrations to dictate her behavior.

Whenever you consider telling the children why you were divorced or separated, ask yourself the 5 questions from Dr. Warshak's Test:

- An honest answer to question 1 will reveal that we might be ready to indulge our destructive urges at our children's expense,
- the answer to number 2 shows no reason to tell the children the other parent was fully responsible for the separation,
- number 3 will demonstrate that there would be no benefit to the children when they hear our opinion that the other parent is totally at fault,

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- number 4 forces the acknowledgment that there would be grave risks in placing blame and the children would not gain any specific benefit, and
- number 5 helps the parent identify the type of explanation that would protect the children's relationship with both parents.

NEW RELATIONSHIPS

It is healthy to go on with your life. Eventually, most single parents will begin to see new people, and have new romantic relationships. In this section we will explore some information about new integrating new relationships into your life as a single parent.

At first, keep your parenting relationship with the children separate from your dating life. New relationships are unpredictable. You will not want the children to keep experiencing a loss if in time you stop dating someone. Give yourself time and wait until you are in a serious relationship before you involve the children with the new person.

Balance your time. Be sure to spend good quality time alone with your children and the new person in your life. Children can feel jealous, and so can the new person in your life. Don't set them up to have to compete for your attention.

Introduce a serious new relationship to your children slowly. If the children feel that you are shoving a new person into them too quickly, they may rebel and refuse to spend time with you and your new friend. Maintain the children as your highest priority. Moving on with your life will mean new people and activities, all of which will take up some of your time and attention but don't overlook your children's needs.

Remember you cannot change other people. Do not get serious about a dating partner, if you notice they are not supportive when it comes to your relationship with your children. An overbearing partner will be a disaster. The new person must let you be the parent. Even if a partner disagrees with your parenting style, your partner should respect you and let you deal with parenting decisions your way.

Choose partners who are neutral regarding the other parent. Your new partner should not take a side. If your new partner feels hatred, resentment, or jealousy toward the other parent there will tend to be problems. Although your new partner should be supportive of you, they should not attempt to handle these problems or to tell you what to do. If they do so, they will cause more conflict and may also be resented by your children.

Assess the situation carefully before you and your new partner decide to join households. The house you live in will also be the children's home. If the new person doesn't respect the children or your parenting, there will likely be conflicts which are very damaging for the children.

Co-Parenting with a Step-Parent

Co-parenting successfully with the other parent after he/she begins a serious relationship with another person will depend on two things:

1. Each parent's degree of resolution in the grief process.
2. The degree to which the other parent and new "step-parent" respect and support each other's important roles as parents.

When the other parent introduces a step-parent

- Identify where you are in the think-feel-do cycle. Take responsibility for your feelings about the other parent's decision to move on. Remind yourself that the other parent has a right to do this.
- If you feel overwhelmed with feelings of hurt, anxiety, or anger, get help to process and deal with these feelings.

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- Be certain to watch your self-talk and distorted thought processes. Expect the new person to be supportive and kind unless you are shown otherwise.
- Do not insist upon speaking only with the other parent about the child when you know the new person or step-parent is involved with the care of your child.
- Do consider the new person's feelings and needs when you make co-parenting decisions.
- Until proven otherwise, accept and believe the new person will probably be a good influence on your children. Do not create unnecessary problems or make unnecessary demands/rules about your children's contact with the new person unless you have a very good reason.
- Do not attempt to exclude the new person from the children's care or activities. Include the new person in discussions regarding discipline, logistics, schedules, etc.
- Understand that a break-up between the other parent and the new person would cause additional damage to your child. Do not do anything to make their relationships more difficult than it already is.

When you bring a step-parent into your co-parenting relationship

- Tell the other parent yourself. Do not allow him/her to hear it from the children.
- Introduce your new partner into your co-parenting relationship slowly.
- Do not insist that your new partner take your side in all conflicts you may have with the other parent. Allow your partner to be objective in the situation.
- Be fair to the other parent and to your new partner. Do not change decisions about your relationship with the other parent to keep your new partner from feeling insecure or jealous.
- Set appropriate boundaries with your new partner about his/her treatment of the other parent. Insist upon respectful behavior that supports the other parent's relationship with the children and with you.
- Do not attempt to mediate communication between the other parent and your new partner. Allow them to establish and develop their own relationship.
- Support your new partner to be assertive and to take care of themselves in the situation – with your children and with the children's other parent. Do not get into the habit of speaking for them.
- Insist that your new partner deal maturely with his/her feelings about your ongoing co-parenting relationship with the other parent. If your new partner behaves poorly, get help for your relationship.

If you are a step-parent:

- Never intrude upon either the natural or other parent's special role with the children.
- Stay objective in the situation. Do not engage in collective bullying of the other parent, even when your new partner would like for you to do so.
- Take care of yourself with the other parent and the children, but leave the major decisions of co-parenting and discipline up to the children's parents.
- Do not force your way into the parenting system. Do not compete with the other parent. Look for ways to support the other parent with the children and gain their trust and respect.
- Be assertive and speak for yourself. You have the same rights as the other adults in the situation; however, you do not have the right to encroach on the special rights of the children's other parent.
- If you feel insecure, jealous, or angry about how things are going, get help for your relationship. Blending a family takes patience and hard work.

BOUNDARIES WITH STEP-PARENTS

A step-parent can be a positive addition to a child's life, however blending a new family is very complicated and is NOT for the faint of heart. First and foremost, children will continue to need time alone with you after you remarried. Everyone will need to respect this simple fact if things are to go well.

A step-parent should be allowed to develop their own relationship with the child. This is best achieved over time during a gradual process of engaging in normal types of relational activities together such as playing games together, helping with chores, reading stories, and showing interest in schoolwork or other projects. Parents

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should not force a child to spend time with a new step-parent and the step-parent should not take it personally if the child doesn't want to spend time with them.. However, step-parents should always try to stay open and available to your children.

A step-parent should not try to take the other parent's place., however they will be the mom or dad of the house once you are married. A step-parent should not ask your step-child to call them "Mom" or "Dad," however if it doesn't cause problems with the other parent it should not be discouraged if the children want to. Notice that I said IF it does not cause problems with the other parent. If the other parent is uncomfortable with the idea, is should not be encouraged, but I think that children should be allowed to call step-parents something they feel comfortable with.

A step-parent's role is different from a parent's role. Many step-parents actually do more and even spend more time with and money on the child, but the parental role can never be replaced. Step-parents are a third adult providing love, needs, etc., for the child but are not replacing the parent, even an absent one. Step-parents should not intrude on the other parent's role at school events and extracurricular activities. Do not place the other parent or the children in an uncomfortable situation.

Step-parents should share household decisions along with you, but discipline is always up to the parents. Step-parents can remind the child of the household routine and rules and expect them to listen, but punishment should always be left to natural parents. Step-parents may intervene when an immediate problem comes up, but should take the least intrusive approach. The child's parent should be making major decisions for the child. Step-parents should respect and follow parenting decisions made by the parents, always showing respecting the parents' choices about limits and guidelines for their children. This will help keep roles clear and limit conflict.

GOALS FOR CHANGE

We have worked hard together in COPE to make sure you can protect your child from your part in parental conflict. You now know exactly what you are doing in every aspect of handling conflict and working with your children to develop and feel stable in their lives. You also know that your functioning as an individual in general will impact the emotional and psychological stability of your child. You being happy, healthy, powerful and clear-minded will make a difference your ability to raise children are also happy, healthy, powerful and clear-minded. But the truth is that many of us have patterns and issues that will hold us back unless addressed and dealt with in a systematic way.

The deeper issues you will be learning about in the next section of this module are problems people have had absolutely no choice in acquiring. These are patterns that people inherit from their family of origin when they are children. If our family was dysfunctional in any way, we develop survival traits to manage painful or frightening dynamics. Some of these traits and patterns are so familiar and seem normal, so you may only be vaguely aware of them. The only way you can shield your own children from inheriting the problems and patterns from you is to take responsibility for identifying and healing them. This work goes to the heart of many of the surface relationship issues that people struggle with. To dig into this area, let's go over some concepts that will help you understand.

FAMILY OF ORIGIN

FUNCTIONAL FAMILY – Each member of the family gets their needs met consistently from the other members. Feelings and the expression of feelings are acceptable. Difference in thoughts, feelings and opinions are contained. Communication is clear and assertive. Roles in the family are clearly defined.

DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY – There are many different types of dysfunction in families such as the Alcoholic or Drug Abusing Family, the Enmeshed Type, the Militaristic or Controlling Type, the Chaotic type, the Abusive

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/ Unsafe system, or family where a parent is either Emotionally or Physically Ill. Some families are a combination of these types, but they all produce the same traits in children. These traits are called survival traits. Depending on the severity of family dysfunction children grow into adults who use childhood survival traits to cope with the demands of their adult lives.

GENERATIONAL TRANSFER OF DYSFUNCTION

The following story written by Elia Wise is about children who have not been treated well by their parents. The point of including this story in the COPE Class is to help parents make the connection to their childhood and some of the traits they may have developed as a means to survive if it was painful. The story demonstrates how the effects of a painful childhood follow an adult for years. You will note that people lose their identity, accumulate shame, inherit pain, develop survival traits, and develop character defects. People use these old patterns to navigate adult life until they find the courage to face the facts and embark on a journey to find their true and authentic selves.

Although this is a story of pain and struggle, it is also a story of courage, hope and healing. If you had a painful childhood, you may resonate with this story. If you, on the other hand, remember your childhood fondly, you will count yourself as lucky after reading this.

Most parents pause to consider their own children at this point. The fact is that parents will be visiting their children with their own unresolved childhood issues and dysfunction whether they mean to or not. I hope it will make parents in the COPE Program think about the importance of working to resolve dysfunctional patterns as honestly as you possibly can. While your children watch you in your own personal journey or growth, they will learn to find their own way just as you do.

Please close your eyes for a moment and think of yourself as a child. Take a deep breath and read the story on the next page. After reading this story, take a moment to journal about what comes up for you.



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FOR CHILDREN WHO WERE BROKEN

Story By: Elia Wise

For children who were broken,
it is very hard to mend . . . Our pain was
rarely spoken
and we hid the truth from friends. Our
parents said they loved us,
but they didn't act that way. They broke
our hearts and stole our worth,
with the things that they would say.

We wanted them to love us. We didn't
know what we did
to make them yell at us
and hit us,
and wish we weren't their kid.

They'd beat us up and scream at us
and blame us for their lives. Then they'd
hold us close inside their arms
and tell us confusing lies
of how they really loved us –
even though we were BAD,
and how it was OUR fault they hit us. OUR
fault that they were mad.

When days were just beginning
we sometimes prayed for them to end,
and when the pain kept coming,
we learned to just pretend
that we were good
and so were they
and this was just
one of those days . . .
tomorrow we'd be friends.

We had to believe it so. We had nowhere
else to go

We who grew up broken
are somewhat out of time,
struggling to mend our childhood,
when our peers are in their prime. Where
others find love
and contentment,
we still often have to strive to remember
we are worthy
and heroes just to be alive.

Some of us are healing.

Some are stealing. Most are passing the
anger on. Some give their lives away to
drugs, or the promise of life beyond. Some
still hide from society. Some struggle to
belong. But all of us are wishing
the past would not hold on
so long.

Each day that we pretended, We
replaced reality
with lies, or dreams,
or angry schemes,
in search of dignity . . .
until our lies
got bigger than the truth,
and we had no one real to be.

Our bodies were forsaken with no safe
place to hide,
we learned to stop
hearing and feeling
what they did to our outsides. We tried to
make them love us,
till we hated ourselves instead,
and couldn't see a way out,
and wished that they were dead.

We scared ourselves by thinking that,
and scared ourselves to know,
that we were acting *just like them* –
and might evermore be so.

To be half the size of a grown-up
and trapped inside their pain . . .

To every day lose everything
with no savior or refrain . . .

To wonder how it's possible
that God could so forget
the worthy child you knew you were,
when you'd not been damaged yet . . .

The journey is not so lonely
as in the past it's been . . . More of us are
strong enough
to let the growth begin.

But while we're trekking
up the mountain
we need everything we've got,
to face the adults we have become,
and all that we are not.

So when you see us weary
from the day's internal climb . . . When
we find fault
with your best efforts,
or treat imperfection
as purposeful crime . . . When you see
our quick defenses,
our efforts to control,
our readiness to form a plan
of unrealistic goals . . .

To figure on your fingers
that the years till you'd be grown
enough to leave the torment
and survive away from home,
were more than you could count to,
or more than you could bear,
was the reality we lived in
and we knew it wasn't fair.

There's a lot of digging down to do
to find the child within,
to love away the ugly pain
and feel innocence again

There's forgiveness
worthy of angel's wings
for remembering those at all,
who abused our sacred childhood
and programmed us to fall.

To seek to understand them,
and how their pain became our own,
is to risk the ground we stand on
to climb the mountain home.

When we run into a conflict
and fight to the bitter end,
remember . . .

We think that winning means
we won't be hurt again.

When we abandon OUR thoughts
and feelings,
to be what we believe YOU
want us to,
or look at trouble we're having,
and want to blame it all on you . . .

When life calls for new beginnings,
and we fear they're doomed to end,
remember . . .

Wounded trust is like a wounded
knee - It's very hard to bend.

Please remember this
when we're out of sorts. Tell us the
truth, and be our friend. For children
who were broken . . .
it is very hard to mend.

The End

NO PAIN, NO GAIN

This is a very sad story which effectively illustrates the aftermath of living in a dysfunctional family. I have had parents in the COPE Class get mad at me for making them read this because it brings up so much pain for them. If you got in touch with the pain of your own childhood while reading the story, consider something. Pain is not the same as hurt. Pain is a part of being human and the experience of pain is actually good for us

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sometimes. To heal and grow, we must be willing to accept and work through pain. This is not the same as being hurt. Just like physical therapy required after many injuries, emotional therapy to recover from psychic injuries will involve a little pain. Don't worry, you can get through it and eventually both you and your children will be better off.

IDENTIFYING ISSUES TO WORK ON

In this section, you will begin to take an inventory of your traits, patterns, and character defects. This will give you the chance to know yourself better and allow you to begin to make changes in areas where you need to. It will enable you to live more comfortably with yourself and others.

We should begin our discussion with some information about the concept of co-dependency. There are many definitions used to talk about codependency. The original concept of codependency was developed to describe common responses and behaviors people develop while living with an alcoholic. However, today, codependency describes a dysfunctional pattern of living and problem solving developed while growing up in a dysfunctional family. Another, description is of one who constantly looks outside themselves for love and support to other people who cannot provide it. Consider some of these other descriptions of co-dependence:

- A set of maladaptive, compulsive behaviors learned in order to survive in a family of origin where there is the experience of great emotional pain and ongoing stress.
- An inability for a person to develop behaviors which get needs met.
- A compulsive psychological state where a person consistently acts against themselves and their own conscious desires.
- Choosing to be chronically involved in relationships that cause great emotional pain and stress.

People who are co-dependent have a greater tendency to get involved in relationships that are "toxic." The codependent person tries to provide and control everything within the relationship without ever addressing their own needs or desires. In other words, the co-dependent tends to form relationships with people who are unreliable, emotionally unavailable, or needy. This is a draining and unhealthy habit that causes the co-dependent person to live in a constant state of emotional intoxication.

Until codependency is addressed and healed, the codependent person will still operate in their own system of co-dependency even with others who have healthy boundaries. This, of course creates problems that continue to repeat. The problems continue into each new relationship.

Later in this section, we will begin to discover ways to begin to let go of these patterns that are carry-overs from the past. You will learn to be an actor, instead of a reactor to the situations in your life. For now, please read the following list of Co-Dependency Traits, Survival traits and Character Defects.

Co-Dependency

Note the items you identify with.

1. Consistently unfulfilled in relationships
2. Tend to be indirect
3. Don't assert yourself
4. Allow your own needs to go unmet
5. Don't play and have fun in life
6. Controlling behavior
7. Distrust
8. Perfectionism
9. Avoidance of feelings
10. Intimacy problems

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11. Caretaking behavior
12. A heightened awareness for potential threat/danger
13. Bodily aches and pains related to stress
14. Chronic physical illnesses

Survival Traits

Note the items you identify with:

1. Isolation
2. Fear of people and authority figures
3. Approval seekers
4. Unclear identity
5. Fear of angry people
6. Difficulty handling personal criticism
7. Abandoning Relationships are prevalent
8. Feeling like victims
9. Overdeveloped sense of responsibility
10. More concerned with others than ourselves
11. Easily find others' faults, but can't look too closely at own
12. Guilt feelings when we stand up for ourselves
13. Feel compelled to go along with others when we really would rather not
14. Emotional excitement characterizes life – easily bored with stability / predictability
15. Often involved with others out of "pity"
16. Enjoy rescuing others
17. Avoid feelings inside. Numb. Have lost the ability to feel or express feelings because it hurts so much (Denial)
18. Judge Self harshly
19. Low sense of self-esteem
20. Terrified of abandonment
21. Hold on to a relationships to avoid the experience painful abandonment feelings
22. Run on emotions
23. React instead of act in life

Character Defects

Note the items you identify with:

1. Selfishness: Taking care of one's own comfort, advantage, etc., without regard or interest of others. Being egocentric, thinking others really do revolve their world around you.
2. Dishonesty: Taking advantage; lying cheating, stealing, etc. Not admitting to our real feelings.
3. Rationalization: Dishonest thinking; another way of lying. We make or bend the truths or facts to end up with exactly the conclusions at which we had planned to arrive. The alibis we make to excuse and justify our behaviors that become a habit.
4. False Pride: Egotistical vanity; too great an admiration of one's self. Inordinate self-esteem, arrogance, show-off display, bragging, and outright stubbornness.
5. Ego and Pride. It's the old false front and includes exaggeration and pretense; any phony "image managing" we do.
6. Resentment: The greatest liability in the entire repertoire. It is the displeasure aroused by a real or imagined wrong or injury, accompanied with irritation exasperation, or hate.
7. Intolerance: Being judgmental. Refusal to accept people who are different from you – in race, color, religion, political persuasion, customs or habits. Intolerance cuts us off from people.
8. Impatience: Unwillingness to bear delay, opposition, pain, bother, etc., calmly. Includes IMPULSIVENESS, doing or saying things without thinking of the consequences.
9. Envy: A kind of jealousy. Wanting something that belongs to someone else; sadness and/or resentment at another's good fortune. LUST can apply here!

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10. Greed: Envy acted out. Thinking we need something someone else has or has more of.
11. Self-Pity: A personality defect and a danger signal to stop it in a hurry. Just plain feeling sorry for yourself.
12. Feelings Easily Hurt: Sensitive, touchy, and thin-skinned. Another kind of false-pride; the result of low self-esteem.
13. Worry: An inner foreboding, real or imagined, of doom ahead. We suspect our actions, overt acts, or negligence, etc., are catching up with us; we fear the worst; unnecessary worrying beyond concern and usually about things we can't do anything about anyway.
14. Procrastination: Putting off and postponing things that need to be done; the familiar, "I'll do it tomorrow." Results from need to do everything and do things perfectly.
15. Perfectionism: The need to do things absolutely perfectly. A big liability for someone who defines himself or herself only by what they do or accomplish. It results from not realizing the difference between trying our best and having to be the best.
16. Rigidity: Not being flexible and adaptable. Having to have things done our way or no way; controlling behavior. The more rigid we get, the more insecure we really are.
17. Complying: Always doing what others want, expect, and demand. Fear of being assertive because of potential loss of someone else's approval, love, etc.
18. Vindictiveness: Getting even, getting back at someone due to a perceived slight or being treated unfairly or hurt in some way. The state of holding on to grudges, never forgiving, or forgiving but not forgetting to the extent of continuing to obsess about what happened.
19. Manipulation: Getting what we want in "crooked" ways; done out of fear that if we are straight in asking for what we need, we won't get our needs met, or not met the way we want.
20. Blaming: To hold (someone or something) at fault. 2. To find fault with: Charge, Condemn, Criticize, Denounce, Fault. Responsibility of a fault or error. 2. Condemnation.

Shame

The issue of shame has to do with how worthy you feel you are to have connections and relationships that matter in life. It is not the same as the feeling of guilt. *Guilt is a regretful feeling about something you have done. Shame is a regretful feeling about someone you ARE.* It has to do with discomfort in being the authentic person you are. Shamefulness drives us to hide our true selves by projecting instead an image of what you think others expect you should be. Brene Brown, a famous shame researcher, teaches us that all people have shame. She says that the more people talk about it, the less they have. The less people talk about shame, the more they have. Brene Brown writes:

"Shame is basically the fear of being unlovable – it's the total opposite of owning our story and feeling worthy. Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging."

I have learned a lot about shame from the books written by John Bradshaw. People who struggle with toxic levels of shame have one of two types of shame identities. Feelings of shame run along a continuum from Shamelessness to Shamefulness. Healthy Shame, the integration of these shame identities is somewhere in the middle.

Note the shame patterns you most identify with:

Shameless Type: This type of toxic shame shows up with people who do a good job projecting "a more than human" front to others. They live from a projected image of perfection and work very hard to maintain standards of excellence in every area of life. To others, they may appear powerful, over-achieving, and "better than everyone else." As more than human, the shameless type may be judgmental, self-righteous, and controlling. As a person who prides themselves on perfection, they demonstrate great difficulty acknowledging their own faults, weaknesses, and defects of character. In conflict, they may blame others as a method of denial and self-delusion.

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Shameful Type: In the shameful type of toxic shame we see people who embody and impersonate a person who is less than human. With this type of shame, people do not try to apply themselves to accomplish much because they do not feel they are capable of anything. Often, there is addiction, chaos, and failure in almost every area of life. This person is filled with a sense of inferiority, feels stupid, weak and acts out in degrading behaviors to demonstrate this to others.

Healthy Shame

All people experience shame sometimes, but healthy people are generally comfortable with who they are. They have developed a sense of themselves that is accurate, authentic and humble. Healthy shame shows up as humility or a sense of being "right sized." With healthy shame, people are proud of their strengths, comfortable with their weaknesses, and do not feel any need to project a false front to others. People with healthy shame tend to take on reasonable, achievable challenges with a realistic concept of their own limits. These people are human. They know they can and will make mistakes, need help and are no more or less worthy than anyone else. They believe they are worthy NOW in spite of their weaknesses and imperfections.

Clinical Issues

Often parents in COPE have been under such extreme levels of stress, a discussion of the common symptoms of depression and anxiety is in order. If you have been experiencing these symptoms, it is important that you get treatment from a qualified therapist and medical doctor as soon as possible. It is very difficult to overcome these symptoms alone.

Note the symptoms you experience:

Depression:

1. Difficulty concentrating, remembering details, and making decisions
2. Fatigue and decreased energy
3. Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and/or helplessness
4. Feelings of hopelessness and/or pessimism
5. Insomnia, early-morning wakefulness, or excessive sleeping
6. Irritability, restlessness
7. Loss of interest in activities or hobbies once pleasurable, including sex
8. Overeating or appetite loss
9. Persistent aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems that do not ease even with treatment
10. Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" feelings
11. Thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts

Anxiety:

1. Fears (anxiety symptoms commonly associated with fear):
2. A heightened fear of what people think of you
3. Afraid of being trapped in a place with no exits
4. Constant feeling of being overwhelmed
5. Fear of being in public
6. Fear of dying
7. Fear of losing control
8. Fear of impending doom
9. Nameless dread

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10. Fear of making mistakes or making a fool of yourself
11. Fear of passing out
12. Fear of losing your mind
13. Fears about irrational things, objects, circumstances, or situations
14. Heightened self-awareness, or self-consciousness

Recovery and Emotional Sobriety

Emotional Sobriety is the polar opposite of emotional intoxication. But what is emotional intoxication? Co-parents can be intoxicated on arguing, fighting and gossip about the other parent. They can also be intoxicated by isolation, approval seeking, and fear. Essentially, emotionally intoxicated parents access an internal medicine cabinet of emotions by continuing their role in the toxic drama with the other parent.

Emotionally sober co-parents demonstrate an appropriate level of acceptance and inner peace about their co-parenting situation – even when it looks very different from the scenario they would have preferred. They have cultivated a sense of inner peace even as they fully experience negative feelings. Emotionally sober parents feel a sense of inner direction and have faith that everything is working the way it is supposed to be in their lives.

The journey out of emotional intoxication is a process of courage, healing work and recovery efforts. It takes time and determination to begin to feel comfortable in your own skin, especially if you have come from a dysfunctional family of origin. In the next section, we will identify ways that you can begin this journey, but for now you should congratulate yourself for having the courage to identify the issues you carry. This is the first step in any recovery process. We cannot change anything we

GOAL SETTING AND MAKING A PLAN OF ACTION FOR CHANGE

Congratulations! You have had the courage to identify aspects of yourself that you can begin to improve. It is now time to put all of this hard work into an action plan.

Making changes within ourselves is one of the hardest but most rewarding things we will ever do for ourselves and the people around us. Adjusting to a tough co-parenting arrangement, learning to be happy, or releasing old self-defeating patterns is not something you can do overnight. You will have to choose, you will have to work and you will have to practice and be patient to see these changes.

Happiness and personal growth takes determination, courage, and discipline. It does not just “come” upon most people. Anything in life worth having is hard work, but the pay-off is always worth it. That is why humans have been working to better their lives since the beginning of time. Today is the first day of the rest of your life, so let’s begin your work now.

Setting clear goals for taking steps to work at change is a powerful strategy to put your intentions into action. Setting goals and developing an action plan for is them subject of this section.

Through this book, you have discovered co-parenting ideals, positive problem solving ideas, skills for healthy relationships, and identified barriers and patterns that get in the way. Reading a book, doing some writing assignment and discussing the topics in 8 two hour sessions is NOT enough support for most parents to make the changes they want to see last in their lives. Your change process will take time and energy. And, you will have to stay invested to making changes, long after the COPE class ends.

Strategies for personal growth are abundant but each of them will require an element of action of your part. Everyone has a different course in their journey. I can only make suggestions of some things you might consider doing to begin making change. What you actually will do depends on how motivated you are, and how much time and energy you are willing to put into it.

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Twelve Step Programs

Joining a 12 step program and working the steps of recovery could be the single most effective way you can make changes in the way you feel and behave. 12 steps are a POWERFUL design for life and benefits participants in many ways. Members of 12 step programs learn coping skills, positive self-talk and gain a spiritual perspective. Toxic shame is melted and replaced with healthy shame as a direct result of belonging and connecting with others who don't judge one another. People learn that it is ok to be honest with themselves and others. From these rooms true friendships emerge. People feel a sense of connectedness with themselves and others that is based on caring, respect and mutual values. People learn conflict resolution principles through the traditions of these programs and learn to respect each other first and foremost. The program helps people let go of the people, places and things they cannot control while lending needed support to help find the courage and strength to make the changes they can within themselves. Adult Children of Alcoholics and Family Dysfunction is the best program for overcoming a painful childhood and softening survival traits. Try Co-dependents Anonymous to find ways to straighten out enabling and co-dependency. For alcohol or drug problems, Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous are the best programs.

Affirmations

For parents who are struggling with self-esteem and confidence, saying daily affirmations of worth are a very powerful strategy for creating compassionate feelings in yourself. In my late twenties I used affirmations to entirely change my negative self-concept and poor self-esteem. I am a living testimony that consistent use of affirmations work. Essentially, affirmations reprogram your belief system as you say them over and over. Eventually new beliefs become second nature. Try these positive affirmations. Say them three times a day to yourself at first. Posting them on the bathroom mirror, and on your desk at the office is a great idea so you won't forget.

- I am a unique and valuable human being.
- I have always done the best I could at any one point in time.
- It is okay to love, respect, and accept myself exactly as I am today.
- I am an okay person – nothing about me is wrong or unacceptable.
- It is okay to let go of the "should," "oughts," and the "musts." I do not have to live up to any image of perfection.
- It is okay not to resent others for their actions because they were doing only as their awareness permitted at any one point in time.
- No one is any more or less worthy than I am.
- I can do anything I want to do with the proper awareness which I am creating day by day.

For other fantastic affirmation ideas, search the web for "positive affirmations." There are many wonderful websites to offer ideas to strengthen your mind in every aspect of life.

Meditation Exercises

Meditation helps you clear your mind, relax, and gain a better connection with yourself. It is a way to find the center in yourself, and be fully in the here and now. I have mentioned mindfulness which helps us watch without judgment what is going on in the mind as we allow our thoughts to pass and be in a place of mindful stillness for a time. This is a great way to relax emotionally. It reduces anxiety, heart rate, and allows the emotional system to take a break for a few minutes a day. People who meditate regularly report experiencing better levels of energy throughout the day, more intuition, and a greater connection with their own internal voice.

Another type of meditation it is called the Loving Kindness Meditation. This is a chanting meditation that asks the universe for the best it has to offer them and others. I like the Loving Kindness Meditation for squeezing out all the distracting "chitter-chatter" of the mind while we focus on asking for the best in life. Start out by memorizing

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the first four lines of the meditation. Say it for yourself 3 times, then, say it for people you care about. Then say it for someone with whom you are currently struggling (other parent). You can expand the meditation little by little until you have memorized the entire thing. The loving Kindness Meditation helps create positive intentions for you and those we love. It is also a great tool to counteract the effects of non-forgiveness when we say the meditation for those who have hurt us.

The Ancient Loving Kindness Meditation

Short Version

May I be filled with loving kindness

May I be safe

May I be well

May I be happy and at ease

Long Version

May I be filled with loving kindness

May I be safe from internal and external danger

May I be well in my mind and in my body

May I be happy just as I am

May I be given grace and cultivate wisdom

May I be peaceful regardless of circumstance

May I be free

Keep a Journal

Writing about our thoughts and feelings is a great way to gain clarity about the matters in our lives. Keep the flow chart of events-thoughts-feelings and actions, a list of feelings words, and the formula for making I statements from section 3 in your journal. After you are finished writing, try to separate your thoughts from feelings and write out your I Statements. Also, identify the belief system you are working from and any distorted beliefs you want to let go of. Keep a list of affirmations and prayers you like in your journal. This is a way to stay connected with your inner most self and to practice the new beliefs and skills you are working on.

Develop a Life Philosophy / Spirituality

The search for meaning and truth in life is a meaningful endeavor. I have come to the belief that all things – even terrible things – have the potential to transform us. Gaining wisdom from the difficult experiences in our lives makes any problem we live through worth the trouble. I also believe that people are supposed to have problems and struggles in life. Earth is not a rose garden. This planet seems to be a place for humans to struggle, grow, and learn. Since every human is in the same boat so to speak, there is no good argument I can find against trying to make the best out of it. Consider these five facts of life:

Five Things

I want to remind you to always remember the nature of life. Life will always be difficult and present use with upsetting material but you will have more inner peace and emotional sobriety by knowing and accepting these five simple things:

1. All things on earth either change or die.
2. Nothing will go according to plan.
3. There will be pain.

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4. It won't be fair.
5. People are not always loving and kind.

If you can accept these five things, you will see that things are just as they are. If you cannot accept these five things, you will see that things are still just as they are.

Read Self Help Books

Reading good self-help books about overcoming the struggles in your life is a very worth-while past time. Reading about different perspectives about common life transitions and dilemmas can help you clarify your own direction more sanely. Used self-help books are sold on Amazon and are very inexpensive and are usually in very good condition. Search a topic you are interested in, read titles and abstracts and give yourself the time to consider the thoughts and perspectives of other people who have written these amazing books.

Psychotherapy

Therapy is a road map to your "self." Working with a good therapist can catapult you in the right direction. It takes courage and true commitment to your life to make this important step but the rewards can be tremendous. The stigma about going to therapy is vanishing in our day in age because people realize that therapy is a true act of self-love. Usually, the healthiest person in a system is the same person who is willing to ask for and accept help. Never be ashamed to sit down with a good therapist.

Attend a Healing Retreat or Workshop

Sometimes we need to give ourselves a special time and space for healing work. Going to a retreat or workshop can be like going on a mini-vacation. Some retreats and workshops are held in beautiful locations and you can find ways to attend them that are very inexpensive. Giving yourself a reprieve from life to consider new ideas and let others take care of you is a precious gift of love you can give to yourself. You will feel recharged and well rested after most of these get-a-ways. Don't be afraid to try something like this, especially if your life energy is low and you need a break.

Here are some other empowering ideas that could be integrated into your plan of action for personal change:

- Participate in a parenting class
- Schedule special time for yourself every week to recharge
- Participate in a new hobby
- Enroll in a training / education program
- Start a long overdue project
- Make amends to people you have hurt
- Role-play new skills with a friend or mentor
- Begin a savings plan
- Carve out special time for each one of your children
- Join a service group / volunteer
- Take an adventure trip
- Learn to do something creative like stain glass, sew, or ceramics
- Hike, surf or rock climb
- Do yoga
- Join a team sport
- Coach your son or daughter in a sport

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- Get a massage
- Re-organize your living space
- Adopt a pet
- Go to the Jacuzzi or Sauna

Now you are ready to put together your goal setting project. I want to encourage you to pick something to work on that has the potential to help activate a growth process that will produce positive change all through your life. Generally, working on the deepest issue you can identify will have the biggest positive impact in your life. I am looking forward to hearing what you have decided to work on.

Module Four Summary

If you have really put your mind into this program, we have sure covered a lot of ground together. I am very proud of the work you have done and want to congratulate you on beginning a journey that will take both you and your children to wonderful place together. Please do not lose momentum. As always I am here to help you if you get stuck. I am just a text message away.