

Instructor's Guide

Class Meeting 2

Factors that Limit the Emotional Development of Children: How the Critical Inner Voice Impacts Parent-Child Relationships

Schedule of Activities

1. Focus on Questions 2 and 3 from page 3 in the Parent's Workbook.
2. Introduce, in simple terms, the concept of the "critical inner voice"—a destructive thought process that is responsible for the transmission of parents' negative attitudes, thoughts, and defenses to their children.
3. Explain briefly how the concept of the critical inner voice evolved. Talk about the importance of writing down one's self-critical thoughts as well as realistic and more congenial views toward oneself in a journal.
4. Describe how parents often develop negative attitudes toward themselves during their childhood. Explain how these negative attitudes and self-critical thoughts can contribute to the development of a negative self-concept in their children instead of a sense of wellbeing and positive attitudes toward themselves. The goal is to explore learn parents' attitudes and behaviors that bring out positive responses and build self-esteem in their children.
5. Explain the difference between false praise and genuine acknowledgment of the child's unique, unfolding personality. Appreciating children's efforts more than praise for the end product helps children build real confidence.

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6. Discuss situations where parents may become irritated with their children—for example, when the child appears incompetent, dirty, messy, whiny, clinging; -- or paradoxically, when children express affection toward their parents. Indeed, some parents find it difficult to accept positive responses from children because their child’s warmth and affection conflict with their basic feelings of being inadequate or unlovable.
 7. Describe ways to avoid experiences that will make the child feel that he/she is “bad.” Suggest ways to repair breaks that inevitably occur in attuned interactions between a parent and child that will enhance the child’s positive sense of self and wellbeing.

15-Minute Break

8. Show excerpts from DVD, [Class 2 The Inner Voice in Child Abuse and Invisible Child Abuse](#) (15 minutes)
9. Open discussion. Parents may be able to describe painful experiences in their own childhood and connect these incidents to limitations they feel they have in relating to their child.
10. Describe the ideas in Dan Siegel’s and Mary Hartzell’s *Parenting From the Inside Out* (Reference: Chapter 7-- “How We Keep It Together and How We Fall Apart: The High Road and the Low Road” (pp. 154-169).
11. View [excerpts from interviews with parents](#) who have explored their childhood experiences and who talk about the critical inner voices toward themselves and their child that they experience at times when interacting with their child.
12. Describe the process of journaling—how it can make us aware of when we are thinking negatively about ourselves so that this self-critical thinking can be interrupted. Explain that when parents interrupt this voice process, and answer its attacks from their own point of view, they feel better about themselves and naturally extend these positive to their children.

Handout for Class Meeting 1: [Introduction to Journaling](#)



Guidelines for Group Process and Topics for Discussion

Influences of Temperament and Environment on Child Development

Chess and Thomas (1986) have noted temperamental differences between infants, e.g., “easy to warm up” and “difficult” babies have been delineated, according to various behavioral responses observed soon after the infants’ birth.

However, John Bowlby, the originator of attachment theory, commented on this finding in a videotaped interview (1984): “An awful lot has been talked about in relation to temperament. Now, temperament is a rubbish bin; if you can’t understand something, you put it down to temperament....there are temperamental differences, but we simply don’t know how to measure them at present.

One important finding is this: that, with very few exceptions, the way an infant behaves in the first week or two of life, whether he is responsive or unresponsive, or whether he’s hypersensitive or not sensitive does not correlate with the pattern of attachment as seen at twelve months. In other words, sensitive, responsive mothers are capable of enabling an infant who is, by any standards rather touchy or difficult in the early days, to become a securely attached child by twelve months. That’s very heartening.”

Thus, infants who are evaluated at birth as being “difficult” or “slow to warm up” can develop into healthy toddlers. A relaxed mother or father can help even a difficult or fussy infant relax and become open to new experiences.



Child Development and Parents' Responses

Most experts in childrearing who have a psychodynamic background emphasize the quality of parent-child relationships rather than focusing on specific techniques to fit every situation. Even more important is parents' focus on themselves—what they feel toward their children and about themselves in specific situations, how they feel about themselves as parents and as individuals in general, and what they recall from their own childhood. This knowledge and understanding will serve to make them more sensitive to the way their child feels and reacts.

It is also helpful to have reliable information about infant and child development and to recognize what children are going through at different stages of their development. For example, it's valuable to have an understanding of the child's reactions to separation experiences and to recognize that parents can help their toddlers and young children deal with separation anxiety and other fears.

The Concept of the Critical Inner Voice

(Reference: Chapter 5 from [*Compassionate Child-Rearing*](#))

The most significant factor that determines how a parent will interact with his/her child is the extent to which the parent likes or dislikes him/herself. The way the parents feel about themselves is related to the way they were treated as children. For example, if the parents were subjected to inconsistent parenting or to harsh forms of discipline (punishment), then they will be limited in how much they can offer their children, despite their strong desires to provide the best for their children. They will tend to criticize themselves much as their own parents did, running themselves down internally, telling themselves that they are inadequate parents. These self-critical attitudes are experienced as negative thoughts or an inner “voice.”



Introduction to “The Inner Voice in Child Abuse” and “Invisible Child Abuse”

In his studies of negative thought processes, Dr. Robert Firestone found that to varying degrees, all people have a negative, hostile point of view toward themselves and that parents can’t help but extend these negative self-attitudes to their children. The child, in turn, picks up his/her parents’ attitudes generally on a subliminal level—and carries these self-critical thoughts with him/her in the form of the “voice.” *The Inner Voice in Child Abuse* shows how these negative thoughts are transmitted from one generation to the next, despite parents’ best intentions and efforts.

1. All children, to varying degrees, suffer trauma and rejection and take on an internal parent, represented by a destructive thought process or critical inner voice.

Children retain this hostile voice throughout their lives, restricting, limiting, and punishing themselves.

2. When they become parents, they are compelled to act out similar abuses on their children, who, in turn, incorporate the punishing attitudes as a self-depreciating thought process, thereby completing the cycle.

15-MINUTE BREAK

Introduction to Video Excerpts

View [Excerpts from *The Inner Voice in Child Abuse* and *Invisible Child Abuse*](#)

The excerpts selected for Class 2, *The Inner Voice in Child Abuse* and *Invisible Child Abuse* explore the internal process, the critical inner voice, which is responsible for the repetition of both physical and emotional abuse from one generation to the next.

The videotape also describes the quality of experiences that children need in order to develop into emotionally healthy adults. Dr. Firestone interacts with a group of parents,



and their honest responses illustrate the personality dynamics underlying the perpetuation of the damaging cycle of mistreatment.

The participants in the parenting group identify the content of their negative “voices” and trace the source of these thoughts to early interactions within their families. Parents’ open discussion of painful experiences, both from their own childhood and with their children, has resulted in decreased guilt, increased compassion for themselves, and a greater sensitivity to children.

View excerpts from the videotapes, *The Inner Voice in Child Abuse and Invisible Child Abuse*

View [Interviews with Parents](#)

Afterwards, facilitate an open discussion about parents’ reactions to the material. Next, describe ways that parents could challenge their critical inner voices, thereby breaking the chain of transmission of negative attitudes from one generation to the next.

There are several ways to help children *not* think badly of themselves:

- (1) avoid cynical, judgmental attitudes toward children;
- (2) use firm guidance with warmth and understanding to control children’s acting out behaviors;
- (3) avoid comparing one child with a sibling or other children;
- (4) teach children that it is never “right” or productive to hate themselves for misbehaving, it is much more constructive to change their behavior in the future.
- (5) Most important, parents should try to serve as good role models for their children by conducting their lives with integrity and valuing their experiences. Identifying their self-attacks (the “voice”), recording their negative thoughts in a journal, and “answering back” with more congenial statements about themselves are all vital steps in the process of positive change.



View excerpts from interviews

Watch interviews conducted by Dr. Lisa Firestone with parents who have explored their childhood experiences and talk about critical inner voices that they have in certain situations with their children.

View [Interviews with Parents](#)

These parents were asked the following questions:

1. What are some of the critical thoughts you've had about yourself as a parent?
2. What are the situations that can trigger your critical inner voices?
3. Do you ever notice words coming out of your mouth that surprise you?

Introduction to the Journaling Process

1. Explain that many situations come up during interactions with a child where parents feel guilty or ashamed of their words and actions. Some parents are even ashamed of how they feel towards their child, if they are irritated, angry or simply bored by their child's company (refer back to *Parental Ambivalence*, reminding parents that all feelings are acceptable). Give an example of a typical incident in the everyday life of a mother or father that fits this scenario. For example, your child acts up and you yell at him or her. Then later, ask yourself, "What negative things are you telling yourself thinking about your behavior? What self-critical thoughts did you have about ? yelling at your child?"

2. Model or **role-play**, verbalizing the voice about that event, e.g., "Look how you made your child feel! You have no self-control! You're not a good parent. You're a lousy parent. You always fly off the handle. You're high strung—that's just the way you are! You can't change! The kid is driving you crazy—but it's your fault, you don't give him enough attention."



3. Demonstrate how you would record these negative thoughts in a journal and what statements you would use to counter them (positive or objective self-affirmations). “I’m getting better at controlling my irritation and my temper. And I’ve been learning a lot about myself and my child. I’m not a lousy parent; I’m doing O.K in many areas of my life and working on this is just another challenge.”

4. “Answering back” to the voice in your own mind through self-reflection and/or through journaling, that is, counteracting these negative views of yourself clears the way for you to return to the situation and repair any disruptions that have occurred in the relationship with your child

(See Introduction to Journaling in [Handout](#))

5. Review material from the PsychAlive YouTube programs featuring Daniel Siegel, that participants viewed in Class 1. Describe the kinds of negative thoughts that parents often experience when they are on the “low road.” Explain how answering back to the voice with more realistic self-attitudes can lead to a state of mind described by Siegel as the “high road.”