

# Chapter Six

Parenting Toward Autonomy

Seek not that the things which happen should happen as you wish; but wish the things which happen to be as they are, and you will have a tranquil flow of life.

—EPICTETUS

If you do not have children, do not think that this chapter bypasses you, for you can still apply the teaching to the relationship with your inner child. If you do have children, it may all come over to you as uncanny, or even daring! Be it so.

This chapter teaches you the value of autonomy, and I believe there is nothing more important for leading a life that is better than good. Why is this so?

Autonomy is the key to sustainable growth, and while this has never been questioned for the animal realm, our modern educational paradigm, with its strong component of ‘child protection’ has gone very

far astray, and actually has created a breeding lot for parent-child codependence.

Let me explain. Autonomy is fundamental for every being in-growth. Without autonomy, there is fusion, symbiosis and dependence. While for certain organisms, such as the human newborn, symbiosis with the mother for a certain time is a biological necessity, *this symbiosis is time-bound* and should gradually give rise to autonomy. While natural symbiosis is needed for the first eighteen months of the newborn, it should gradually come to an end after that period. Unfortunately, modern culture is more or less completely dysfunctional regarding this primal movement from fusion to autonomy that should take place, dynamically, in the growth process of the human baby.

What happens is that the necessary biological symbiosis with the mother, eighteen months from birth, is neglected for various reasons; many babies suffer from a more or less stringent *tactile deprivation* that will leave scars for their whole lives. In order to compensate for the lack of care bestowed upon the infant, as a guilt-reaction and for various other reasons, the post-symbiosis condition is not better for the child: instead of growing into autonomy most

children in our culture grow into codependence with their parents and caretakers; instead of building a gradually larger extent of autonomy, parents tend to gradually entangle their children in a tight net of stiffening dependencies.

A naturally raised child is typically more independent and more autonomous than a child who is rarely touched, or lacks affection and has become neurotic. The frequently observed clinging behavior of modern city children, their helpless, clumsy and irresponsible behavior, even as late as when approaching puberty, their immaturity in handling sharp or fragile objects such as knives or glasses show well their neurotic blockage and codependent entanglement with their parents.

There is a *natural striving for autonomy* built into every growing life. A child of three years of age needs more autonomy than a child of fifteen months of age. For example, a toddler of eighteen months needs more autonomy than a baby of five months. Many parents ignore that babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers, already before reaching the age of primary school, need to develop autonomy.

Many adults believe that children grew through magic shifts, like the one from babyhood to childhood, from childhood to youth and from youth to adulthood. The first shift is believed to take place around seven years of age, the next one around twelve years of age and the final one around eighteen years of age.

Sorry, but this is really talking about myths. These shifts don't exist in real life as all growth is gradual and smooth. This is why all education should be gradual and smooth. While it is a good thing to have certain initiation rites or ceremonies that mark important steps in the growth of children, these rites are what they are: mark stones that border an otherwise seamless road. I arrive at a mark stone, I see the mark stone, I touch the mark stone, I pass the mark stone, I remember the mark stone. My passing the mark stone is gradual, and smooth in time, and the mark stone itself is of lesser importance than my passing it.

What is important is that I constantly grow, that I remain moving. We learn the basic movement into autonomy during our first year of life, and not later on during adolescence or when we allegedly turn into that magic world of adulthood.

I do not belittle the important changes that take place in the life of adolescents, and their sometimes passionate focus upon getting more autonomy, nor do I belittle the marking shift from adolescence into final adulthood. But often we observe that especially those adolescents who have rather repressive and possessive parents get onto the obnoxious track and really push it through for every millimeter of increased autonomy. There is a logic in every behavior and adolescents who put high stress on autonomy have a reason to do so. The reason is rooted in much earlier years, in the years of babyhood.

### **What is Parent-Child Codependence?**

Parent-Child Codependence frequently if not typically occurs within the modern nuclear family. I use the following terms synonymously with codependence: *co-fusion, secondary fusion, pseudo-fusion and symbiotoholism.*

The major part of the literature deals with codependence in the partner relation, while my own research focuses on parent-child codependence and the resulting lack of autonomy in children, typical for modern society.

The problem manifests in the parent-child relation typically for the first time after the critical mother-infant symbiosis, and thus as a general rule after the first eighteen months of the newborn.

What is generally very little known is the fact that even before the completion of the 18<sup>th</sup> month of the infant, mother and child are interacting in a subtle communication about limits which reveals to what extent the mother is able and willing to give the infant autonomy, or not. This early dialogue, that is most of the time nonverbal, has been found to deeply condition people for their later relational behavior patterns.

In other words, codependence is a compensation reaction of entangled organisms that tries to heal a split caused by a lack of early parent-child intimacy.

The entanglement paradoxically comes about through a *lack of physical closeness*, and of communication, and generally the tactile deprivation of the child, and also through non-physical elements such as parents' thoughts constantly focused on money and status or children generally relegated to receiving affection from secondary caretakers, babysitters, house teachers, and the like.

The entanglement specifically *comes about through lacking autonomy of the child*, and of lacking exposure to experiences and a social life outside of the family. This has been shown with abundant evidence by the long-term research of James W. Prescott, Ashley Montagu, Michel Odent, Frederick Leboyer, Alexander Lowen and the outspoken teaching on the matter by the late child psychotherapist Françoise Dolto.

The problem of codependence is for obvious reasons much more stringent in the individualistic and separative modern consumer culture than in highly sociable 'open' societies such as African, South American or Asian cultures. Yet in these societies today we face the problem in the middle and upper classes as well because they have adopted consumer values and a lifestyle that is modeled by the media, thereby shunning their own perennial wisdom that their grandparents still were knowledgeable about.

There are many false signals in today's popular culture and vulgarized psychological publications.

These false signals lead to parents' becoming more and more insecure as to the role physical affection plays in parenting. This makes that parents are more

or less constantly bombarded with ambiguous messages with the result that many of them anxiously retreat physically from their children, thereby enclosing them in atrocious feelings of abandonment, loneliness and despair.

As a result of the misguided 1960s American pediatrics, that fostered a physical separation between parents and child which in the meantime is seen as a fundamental error, many of today's parents have never had an affectionate childhood themselves and become dysfunctional parents of their own children.

Another important insight into *mother-child codependence* is that it deprives the child, typically the boy, of the time and care needed for developing his true intelligence.

Men who grow up entangled with their mothers are caught in a net of stiffening responsibilities, or obligations, or what is felt as such, which impedes them from really thinking of themselves, and minding their own business. The result is that they hardly think their projects through to the end, constantly harassed by their demanding mothers, threatened with love denial or even financial starving in case they disobey and begin to live their own lives. In this



sense, the son bears the cross, so to speak, for the sins committed by his mother.

### **Autonomy is a Biological Function**

That autonomy is a biological function may sound astonishing and novel in the ears of psychologists, but systems research has clearly brought to daylight that autonomy is built into the very structure of living systems. It's thus not just an add-on to a modern education that prevents parent-child emotional entanglement, which was one of the flaws of authoritarian education with its unhealthy codependence between caretaker and child.

In order to explain the why and how, I need first elucidate what *autopoiesis* is. Fritjof Capra, in his book *The Web of Life* (1996) calls it 'the pattern of life.' According to systems researchers Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, the key characteristic of a living network is that it continually produces itself.

Autopoiesis, or 'self-making,' is a network pattern in which the function of each component is to participate in the production or transformation of other components in the network. In this way the network continually makes itself. It is produced

by its components and in turn produces those components.

—Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life* (1996), 162.

Autopoiesis can best be explained with the functional unit of a plant cell. There are the basic components, the membrane, the nutrient fluid, the nucleus and several specialized parts called ‘organelles,’ which are analogous to our body organs; the most important of those organelles are the storage sacs, recycling centers, powerhouses, and solar stations. Like the cell as a whole, the nucleus and the organelles are surrounded by semipermeable membranes that select what comes in and what goes out. The cell membrane, in particular, takes in food and dissipates waste.

I will now skip all further explanations about the functionality of the living cell, and jump ahead to page 167 of the book, where Fritjof Capra writes:

Since all components of an autopoietic network are produced by other components of the network, the entire system is organizationally closed, even though it is open with regard to the flow of energy and matter. This organizational closure implies that a living system is self-organizing in the sense that its order and

behavior are not imposed by the environment but are established by the system itself. In other words, living systems are autonomous. This does not mean that they are isolated from their environment. On the contrary, they interact with the environment through a continual exchange of energy and matter. But this interaction does not determine their organization—they are self-organizing. Autopoiesis, then, is seen as the pattern underlying the phenomenon of self-organization, or autonomy, that is so characteristic of all living systems. (Id., 167-168).

What is true inside the cell is true in outward life. This is so because there is only one life, and one law of life, which unites all phenomena that we can observe about life. The growth of a cell can be mirrored in the growth of a human baby. And as living systems need autonomy for healthy growth, so do children. This is something not readily understood in modern consumer culture, which is why I have set out to write about it.

The late French child therapist Françoise Dolto (1908-1988) has stressed how important it is to grant children autonomy, from early on, over the entire period of their growing up, virtually from infancy over adolescence into adulthood. The scars of lacking

autonomy in childhood are real and difficult to heal. Our behavior is strongly conditioned by our feeling of freedom, and in this sense, autonomy means freedom, while the contrary, *codependence* with our caretakers means bondage and emotional manipulation.

Now, after you got this information about the roots of emotional abuse, which may be novel for you, what are you going to do with the raising of your children, and how will you cope with their budding sexuality? (In the Bibliography you find enlightening literature about this issue that is so much a problem in our morality-based culture).

But to not complicate matters, let us discuss the problem here in its more general perspective. First of all, let me ask: do you want your children have a life that is better than good, and thus do you want them to have what you want to enjoy for yourself? I am asking that for if you put a categorical *No* here, our dialogue about this matter does not even start, right?

## Q & A Session

Q. Why is autonomy the key for sustainable growth?

A. This is a simple biological truth. All life strives to be autonomous, thus autonomy is fundamental for every being-in-growth. Without autonomy, there is fusion, symbiosis and dependence. While for certain organisms, such as the human newborn, symbiosis with the mother for a certain time is a biological necessity, this symbiosis is time-bound and should gradually give rise to autonomy. While natural symbiosis is needed for the first eighteen months of the newborn, it should gradually come to an end after that period.

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Q. What is going wrong in modern times with the education of the small child?

A. Unfortunately, modern culture is more or less completely dysfunctional regarding this primal movement from fusion to autonomy that should take place, dynamically, in the growth process of the human baby. What happens is that the necessary biological symbiosis with the mother, eighteen months from birth, is neglected for various reasons; many babies suffer from a more or less stringent tactile deprivation that will leave scars for their whole lives. In order to compensate for the lack of care bestowed upon the infant, as a guilt-reaction and for various other reasons, the post-symbiosis condition is not better for the child: instead of growing

into autonomy most children in our culture grow into codependence with their parents and caretakers; instead of building a gradually larger extent of autonomy, parents tend to gradually entangle their children in a tight net of stiffening dependencies. A naturally raised child is typically more independent and more autonomous than a child who is rarely touched, or lacks affection and has become neurotic. The frequently observed clinging behavior of modern city children, their helpless, clumsy and irresponsible behavior, even as late as when approaching puberty, their immaturity in handling sharp or fragile objects such as knives or glasses show well their neurotic blockage and codependent entanglement with their parents.

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Q. What is parent-child codependence?

A. The lack of primary symbiosis later on leads to parent-child codependence which is one of the most stringent and yet almost unknown problems in child rearing today. The result is a host of complications in the natural process of child rearing which can in extreme cases result in autism and psychosis, and in the average case leads to a perversion of the sexual response in the later adult, and codependent partner relations. It's one of the most hidden problems of our time yet it has disastrous consequences for people's ability to handle their emotions and their sexual attraction. It also leads to domestic violence with men later in life who have been raised by narcissistic and codependent mothers.

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Q. Why can we say that autonomy is a biological function?

A. Systems research has clearly brought to daylight that autonomy is built into the very structure of living systems. It's thus not just an add-on to a modern education that prevents parent-child emotional entanglement, which was one of the flaws of authoritarian education with its unhealthy codependence between caretaker and child. Living systems are characterized by autopoiesis, which means 'self-making' and is a network pattern in which the function of each component is to participate in the production or transformation of other components in the network. In this way the network continually makes itself (Fritjof Capra). The growth of a cell can be mirrored in the growth of a human baby. And as living systems need autonomy for healthy growth, so do children. This is something not readily understood in modern consumer culture, which is why I have set out to write about it. The scars of lacking autonomy in childhood are real and difficult to heal. Our behavior is strongly conditioned by our feeling of freedom, and in this sense, autonomy means freedom, while the contrary, codependence with our caretakers means bondage and emotional manipulation.

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