

IT'S NOT OUR FAULT

Nina Danielson, MSW

© 2008

I want to begin by saying that, although I believe that the relationships that we have with our children may have a profound affect on them, we are not the sole determinants of their mental health nor do we have the power to be. I am so totally “done” with parent bashing. And I am even more against the fact that we bash ourselves- which is far too common an occurrence! I believe what I am saying as a professional and also believe it as a mother. I know how hard we have all tried to be good parents. Practically all loving parents are extremely sensitive in this area and most particularly parents whose children have problems.

The psychoanalytic beliefs that were prevalent during the mid twentieth century did untold damage to many parents, particularly mothers. Mothers do not cause psychosis. Nor do they cause autism. Poor mothering is simply not responsible for every single emotional problem on the part of the child, as was then believed. Poor parenting does not create ADD any more than it is responsible for creating Cystic Fibrosis. What a terribly unfair indictment!

Many parents were targeted and made to suffer unfairly and needlessly for over half a century. Parenting a child who was “different” became a statement of our shame and failure as parents. We are still struggling with this stigma and often experience unbearable guilt and self-blame. If we continue to buy into this cruel belief, we not only do damage to ourselves, but we cannot really effectively be there for our children. We can no longer allow these beliefs to undermine the loving devotion and support that we, the parents, must give to our “at risk” children. As parents, our support and advocacy is vital because our particular level of devotion and tenacity is seldom, if ever, able to be provided by anyone else!

Parents do not have the ability to cause true mental illness at all - other than unwittingly through our genetics. A heavy burden has been placed upon mothers, particularly, in the belief that a mother’s ability to nurture is what entirely determines the ultimate wellbeing of the child. This concept totally excludes the role of the child’s individual nature and the role of the father and/or other significant people and factors in the child’s environment. I will even go as far as to say that, short of being monstrously abusive or abandoning a child to such abuse, I don’t believe that parents really have the power to cause mental illness at all. By far, the majority of true mental illness is biologically and/or genetically based.

It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to notice that even very tiny infants each have their own individual personalities long before the environment has taken hold on them. When I was young- a first-time mother- some of my friends and I formed a book club in an attempt to

keep our minds from melting. We would read a new book each week and then get together to discuss it. We began when our children were each three months old. Of course, they would join us at the meetings. It was amazing to observe how our children were so completely different from one another! I don't think that we had even had enough time on earth with them as yet to have profoundly affected their personalities in any way. One was high strung, nervous and cried a great deal. One seemed laid back, easy going and demanded little. Mine was highly social and already flirtatious. How could we account for these differences? Nature. It was the nature of each child that we were witnessing.

Jerome Kagan has written a wonderful book entitled, "The Nature of the Child," where he discusses the importance of each child's own individual temperament. It is a ground breaking book in that it totally challenges the role of nurturing as the sole determinant of a child's personality and debunks the beliefs of the old psychoanalytic school. Nature versus nurture continues to be an ongoing debate. We tend to swing from one belief to another and then back again. "Bad blood" becomes "bad parenting" becomes "individual temperament" and then perhaps it will be back to bad parenting once again. I sincerely hope not!

I believe in nature as strongly as I believe in nurture and I know that there are many questions that remain as yet unanswered. However, there is one thing of which I am absolutely, completely convinced! I unquestionably believe that the way in which a parent responds and connects to their own child's individual nature and the relationship that they forge together is paramount in influencing that child's future. You cannot have this relationship if you are in denial of your child's problems or blame yourself. Imperfect parenting may and sometimes does profoundly influence one's self esteem, the ability to trust others and future intimate relationships. After all, the very first and deepest love affairs are with our parents. But unrequited love seldom drives us crazy- just neurotic. So, who among us isn't? But the neurotic child is rarely the kind of child we are dealing with and worrying about well past their childhoods and in to our old age.

D.W. Winnicott, a famous psychoanalyst who began his career as a pediatrician in the early part of the twentieth century, coined the phrase "good-enough" mother. I love him for this. Winnicott doesn't say that mothers have to be perfect or meet their child's every need. He simply states that they have to be "good-enough." I have a magnet on my refrigerator that has a picture of the ideal Dick and Jane type family; a mother, father and their two children- a boy and a girl. Each are dressed immaculately in sweaters and trousers or skirts. They are all smiling lovingly at one another. The caption below reads, "They always planned to ruin their children's lives...and by and large they succeeded." Everyone laughs. The reason this magnet was made at all; the reason that people, like myself, buy it and enjoy it is simply because the concept is so ludicrous. No one, absolutely no one, consciously sets out to ruin their children's lives.

The "good enough" mother (or primary caretaker) creates an environment in which the child is ultimately able to feel "good-enough" about being themselves. This means that we must have the ability to accept them for who they are and this may mean that they will

never be able to be what we would have dreamed of for them. Of course, we must go through a period of grief in order to let go of the child that we dreamed of and accept child that we have. But it is vital that we relate to the child that really exists and not our fantasy or hope for them. We need to provide a relationship that is based in reality. We must accept the child who is really there. Then, and only then, can we actually begin to meet their needs. Free from our guilt and shame, we can provide our children with the loving advocacy that they so desperately need.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Nina Danielson, M.S.W., a seasoned therapist and lecturer with 40 years of experience in the mental health field and author of **WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR THERAPIST ISN'T THERE**. She earned her master's degree in Social Work from Columbia University and is an advisor for The Compassionate Friends, a support network for bereaved parents and siblings. She maintains a private practice on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, where she lives with her husband and three-and-a-half dogs (they share custody of a granddog with one of their sons).