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Section D

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## 'FEAR OF INTIMACY'

Parents, children can break chain of destructive attitudes and behavior

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STEVE MALONE/NEWS-PRESS  
Joyce Catlett, co-author of "Fear of Intimacy," believes parenting classes are pointless unless parents recognize behaviors that they are repeating from their childhood.



The voice. You know it; you hate it.

If you're a woman chances are it's the voice of your mother. If you're a

man, it's that of your father. It's an angry voice, an impatient voice, a voice that threatens, punishes, scorns.

You remember it well from your childhood, and you swore you would never use it when you grew up. But then your child, your mate or perhaps a subordinate at work does something you disapprove of. You want to respond in a reasonable, measured way; instead, you turn into you-know-who on a very bad day.

Psychologist Robert Firestone has spent decades studying this cycle, in which attitudes and behaviors are passed down unconsciously from parent to child. "I have a broad picture of three generations of people," he said. "I've watched how people imprint their children and how the children's defenses mimic the parents' defenses."

He has also seen that chain get broken, albeit not without hard work and uncomfortable self-examination. "If we don't question our lives," the Santa Ynez Valley resident asserted, "we become victims of our programming."

As do those around us -- especially our kids.

Firestone and his longtime colleague Joyce Catlett explore these issues in their book "Fear of Intimacy" (American Psychological Association). Their premise -- which was developed by Firestone over many years of research and personal observation -- can be summed up as follows:

Everyone is emotionally wounded in childhood. The only issue is to what degree.

We respond to these wounds by creating defenses -- belief systems that give us the illusion of strength and safety.

These defenses, which helped us cope as children, become destructive in adulthood, preventing genuine intimacy and hindering us from achieving our potential.

Through our behavior, we pass these wounds onto our children, who then start the cycle all over again.

"Parents have two kinds of feelings about themselves: They like themselves and they don't like themselves," said Catlett. "They extend both of those feelings to their kids. On the one hand, they have a lot of love and concern, and they treat them nicely a lot of the time. But sometimes they resent their kids and do things to them or with them that they know they shouldn't do. These negative events have a huge impact on the child."

Catlett, a mother of three and grandmother of three, acknowledged this process doesn't seem fair. She believes one eruption of rage on the part of a parent can damage a child, even if the parent is kind and loving 90 percent of the time. Unfortunately, that's just how it works.

"Sometimes you see parents lose control of their anger," she said. "The child, in that moment, is terrified. He is too afraid to keep on identifying with himself as this weak, vulnerable child. So he identifies with the punishing parent. This takes away a little bit of his fear. It's a defense. But it comes at a huge cost to himself."

"He also takes on all the anger, the aggression, the hostility and even the guilt that the parent might be feeling. This becomes part of his internal dialogue -- this self-attacking voice, as we describe it. He uses this to run himself down the rest of his life. When he is under tension as a parent, he might strike out toward his child in the same way his parent did -- without meaning to. You take on the worst caricature of your parent as part of yourself."

Famed child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim observed a similar

process in Nazi concentration camps. "The prisoners who were there for long periods of time started identifying with the guards," Catlett noted. "They started punishing their fellow inmates. That gave them an imaginary feeling of security, an illusion of being more powerful.

"These defenses are survival mechanisms for the child," she said. "He can't help forming them. Children cannot afford to see parents as inadequate or out-of-control; their survival depends on having an adequate parent. They can't afford to see them realistically. It would be too terrifying. So they idealize them. Children always feel like they're at fault."

So, according to Firestone and Catlett, we grow up emotionally guarded, identifying with the powerful people who had control over us. On an unconscious level, we pick mates who remind us of our parents, so we can approximately re-create our families of origin. That proves comforting, since we have already constructed our defenses to deal with just such a family.

"Most people prefer their defenses over a more positive life," Firestone said. "They've learned to live that way. They don't like the anxiety that comes with change."

The ramifications of this are huge, Firestone and Catlett argue. Unable to truly connect emotionally because of those still-in-place childhood defenses, people drift apart, leading to either divorce or marriages based on a pretense or fantasy of closeness. Afraid to let go of their defenses, they turn away from genuine love and intimacy. Unable to feel compassion for themselves as children, they have less empathy for the weak and powerless. And, of course, they pass these attitudes onto their children.

"This raises a tremendous amount of guilt," said Catlett. "In our parenting classes, we show videos of parents talking about what happened to them as kids. That helps them forgive themselves for what they're doing (to their own kids).

"The hardest thing to give up is the idealized view of the parent," she added. "An abused child has to feel the anger and outrage that another person treated him this way. He has to then go through the grief process. Then you have to realize you're not a kid anymore and you can take responsibility for your actions. At the end of this process, some forgiveness will come out of seeing them as people who were hurt the same way you have been hurt. But you can't circumvent the process.

"In our therapy, we try to get people to have a realistic view of their parents. Not an overly critical one; we don't bash parents. But we don't want people to fail to notice their faults and weaknesses. That means they're continuing to run themselves down."

Firestone, 69, is chief theoretician of the Glendon Association, which was formed in Los Angeles in 1982 and relocated to Santa Barbara in 1996. A native of the Bronx, he spent more than 20 years in private psychotherapy practice in Los Angeles. His theories are based on his observations not only of his patients, but of a close-knit group of friends he has been associating with since the 1970s.

"All of this is based on empirical evidence, although not structured in a scientific study," he said. "I didn't just sit and theorize."

Catlett, 67, started working with Firestone in 1971. Since the early '80s, they have written six books together, and she has co-produced more than 30 video documentaries, most aimed at mental-health professionals.

Looking back on his career, Firestone acknowledged that psychological concepts are in much wider circulation today than they were 30 years ago. But he doesn't consider that a good thing.

"There's been a banalization of psychological terms because of the frequency of use," he said. "They've come to mean almost nothing. It's sad. There's a lot of interest in self-help books, but only those that offer easy solutions. I'm surprised my book (released late last year, and already in its third printing) is doing as well as it is."

Firestone is also distressed that today's insurance companies and HMOs are unlikely to pay for long-term therapy, preferring the cost-effective approach of drugs such as Prozac. "That's a very negative trend," he said. "Society has managed to put a pretty good cap on the practice of long-term psychotherapy. It exposed the insides of the family. Society cracked down on the truth.

"I think the kids were on the right track in the '60s, with anti-materialism, caring about others, leading a softer, more loving life," he said. "But they destroyed themselves, and their cause, with the drugs. It's a pretty conservative era right now. There's a lot of rigidity and less concern from people."

But then, how much concern can there be for others when we haven't acknowledged our own wounds? That's the argument Firestone and Catlett make. "We don't have to dredge up every little thing that happened to us as a child," Catlett said. "But we have to understand the ways we learned to protect ourselves. Those are the things people don't know about.

"(It's like) the disease of pneumonia. The body reacts to the virus by forming all these defenses, like congestion. A lot of times, the patient dies, or is debilitated by, the defenses the body forms, rather than directly from the virus. It's the defenses that really hurt us."

And, she added, hurt our children. Catlett is convinced that all the parenting classes in the world will be useless unless parents deal with these core issues. Otherwise, inevitably, the voice will emerge.

"The best way to be good parents is to be happy in your life -- to live an honest, decent life and try to fulfill yourself," she said. "The best thing that parents do for their children is to be good role models."

(Joyce Catlett and psychologist Lisa Firestone, Robert's daughter, will give a talk on "Fear of Intimacy" at 2 p.m. Sunday at the Barnes and Noble Bookstore, 829 State St. The Glendon Association's Web site is [www.glendon.org](http://www.glendon.org).)

**FYI**

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