

Recycling - A Theory of Hope

a newsletter for people who care about self-esteem

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Dear Readers,

The new book, *Time-In: An Alternative to Time-Out*, will be out in November, and you will hear about it in a fall issue of *WE*. Since I have been taking time-out to work on Time-In, this issue is a bit late.

Also, my plans for this issue were too ambitious. Therefore I am offering what I have and asking for your help. Here is the situation.

- ♦ The theory of recycling has been helpful to many people.
- ♦ *WE* readers have requested an issue on recycling.
- ♦ While the uses of recycling theory in therapy have been extensively recorded, the recognition and application of it in educational settings have been written about in pieces or shared orally.
- ♦ Getting this body of knowledge written in one place is too big a job for one issue of *WE* and is too important an endeavor to be done by just one person.
- ♦ Therefore, I am asking for your help. The adage, *Success has a thousand fathers and mothers, failure only one*, means to some people that it is wise to let others take credit for what you have done. To me it means that no one works alone. While one person may respond to a need, have an inspiration, generate a project, and see it through, it is usually the added wisdom of the *thousand* that moves the project beyond one person's passion to something that helps a deep idea

have wide appeal. So, I am asking for your observations and your stories.

In this issue you will find

1. a brief definition of recycling.
2. a description of how children, teenagers, and adults recycle. *
3. some ways to teach about recycling.
4. a request for your learnings and your stories.

I will combine these into a small booklet and we will have started the task of making the information about the uses of recycling theory in education available in one place.

This theory of recycling can be a life-changing model for *hope*. I *hope* it will be as helpful for you as it is for me.

Hopefully yours,

* Adapted from *Family Information Services*
Vol. starting in May, 1998.

What is Recycling?

The theory of recycling¹ proposes that the emotional and intellectual developmental tasks of childhood are basic to human life at every age. Therefore, those same tasks will be addressed again and again as there is a need for them to be updated to meet life's new demands. This updating or recycling occurs in a rhythmic cycle which, at times, may be superseded in response to events in life that demand a focus on specific tasks.

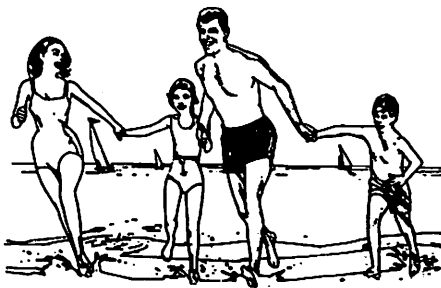
¹ Pamela Levin gave the name "recycling" to this theory in her book, *Becoming the Way We Are*, published by Health Communications, Pompano Beach, FL, 1998 (First published in 1974).

Remember that this is a theory for you to think about. Of course it does not explain all behaviors, but as you read the following stories you may think of behaviors that could be attributed to recycling. If you are willing to share any of those stories, please send them to *WE* to be included in the expanded booklet about recycling.

A Theory of Hope

Recycling is a theory that offers hope in two ways. The first is the idea that when we meet a new situation where our old skills don't apply, we can recycle, build on, bring up to speed, skills we learned earlier.

The second hopeful aspect is that if we missed something during our growing up years, we can find ways to claim, to recycle those skills in positive ways during later years. Sometimes this requires the help of a skilled therapist or the support of a counselor or social worker. Many adults get the help they need by doing everyday activities that can support the recycling process. Examples of these activities are offered for each developmental stage in *Growing Up Again*¹.



The recycling theory can be very helpful to us in parenting. As our children learn new tasks, we get to recycle ours. In addition, if we are having difficulty parenting a particular age child, we can look back at our own childhood to see if there were some things we didn't get. If so, we need to get those in adult ways now so we don't get in competition with our children over whose needs will be met.

To explore the ideas of recycling, let us look first at how children may recycle, then at adolescent behaviors, and then at examples of adult recycling.

CHILDHOOD

Recycling or Regressing - When Children Act Little

When Children Act Little, What Is Going On?
Why is she acting like that? I thought we finished that six months ago. I'm worried about her!

Regression?

Amos, twelve, was confined to the house with a boring illness. His mother was amused and interested when he pulled out the box of old Legos and spent three hours building a magnificent tower. He hadn't played with Legos for years. She remarked that Amos had regressed.

The word regression is often loosely used to describe a behavior that is typical of a younger age. But, strictly speaking, Amos had not regressed. He certainly had not experienced the dictionary description of regression as *a return to a former stage of life, especially through hypnosis or mental illness*. He had not relapsed, reverted, or deteriorated. Nor had he experienced the second description of regression, *a retreat to immaturity*. While he may have been building the Lego edifice with an eight year old's delight, he had responded to his mother's questions in his usual twelve year old manner, and the tower he built was far more sophisticated than any he had built at a younger age. We could say he was *recycling* Lego building.

A form of *regression* that many parents are familiar with happens when a very young child is presented with a new baby. Three year old Kendra retreated to immaturity. She lost toilet training, whined, cried, demanded a bottle, and wanted to be rocked any time the parents were caring for the new infant. Parents can ease a child through this stage by remembering that it is hard to be replaced when you are too young to know that there is enough love to go around. If it is not possible to get another adult to help, probably the best way to shorten the time of the regression is to join it, to say, "As soon as new baby goes to sleep, you will be my baby again and I will love you and care for

¹ To learn more about recycling, read: *Self-Esteem: A Family Affair* by Jean Illsley Clarke, Hazelden Educational Materials, 1978, 1998, or *Growing Up Again, Parenting Ourselves, Parenting Our Children* by Jean Illsley Clarke and Connie Dawson, Hazelden Educational Materials, 1998.

you again just as I did when *you* were first born." If this doesn't help, get help.

Recycling to Reinforce Developmental Tasks

Children, even young children, have to recycle developmental tasks many times. The tasks of each stage are succinctly listed in *Growing Up Again*.

Since the developmental tasks that life presents to us are so deep and so complex, it would be naive to expect that children could complete learning them the first time through

Recycling Being

At the time Elizabeth Crary, parent educator and author², was introduced to the theory of recycling, her daughter had just turned three. *Her daughter, a determined, independent child had insisted on not being carried as soon as she could walk. She had also been feeding and dressing herself for some time.*

Shortly after her third birthday she wanted to go back and be babyish. Part of the day she wanted to be fed, carried, and dressed as if to reinforce her belief that it is okay for her to be alive.

Elizabeth, who was in a position to devote the time, patiently and with loving assurance, fed, carried, and dressed "her baby" for a time each morning. Elizabeth offered the following being messages in behaviors, spoken words and songs. "I'm glad you are alive. You belong here. What you need is important to me. I'm glad you are you. You can grow at your own pace. You can feel all of your feelings. I love you and I care for you willingly." In about two weeks the babyish behavior was gone.

Elizabeth wondered if her daughter was recycling her "being" tasks. This little girl had five friends her age. Elizabeth asked the parents of those friends what was going on with their children. Two children who had recently been presented with new siblings were also wanting to be fed, dressed and carried. Their parents insisted that they be big girls, grow up, and act like the big sisters. Their babyish behaviors lasted from six to nine months. The other three-year-old

children with no new sibling also had displayed babyish behaviors. You may want to observe the three year olds you know and see if they fit anywhere in this picture.

Elizabeth decided to track possible recycling of infant or *Being* behaviors and reported that they are easily noticeable at six and twelve. This fits Pamela Levin's theory that there is a natural rhythm of recycling that occurs every six or seven years.

Think of all the ways six year olds need to be sure we are there for them as they start "big school." If they want special help with dressing, certain foods, and more attention, this is a good time to give it and to reassure them that we love them and will care for and be there for them.

Elizabeth reported an amusing story of a friend's twelve year old recycling the being stage "with new stuff added." Picture this twelve year old boy, lying on a sofa, drinking pop from a baby bottle and watching the Miss America Pageant.

Recycling theory suggests that teenagers recycle all of the earlier stages with sexuality added. What a harmless way for this child to revisit an earlier stage.

Recycling Being, Doing, Thinking

Sometimes children recycle in dramatic ways if their development has been interrupted. When Carrie, age four, was moved from a highly neglectful and abusive environment to a competent, caring foster home, she reacted with rebellion and suspicion for the first few days. The foster care she received was gently firm and consistently warm, loving, and inviting, and apparently she decided to trust it or at least to give it a try. Abundant love and firm structure seemed to make it safe enough for her to be in touch with that innate drive to connect and achieve.

Her foster mom reported that Carrie started little and spent two or three weeks recycling each stage. *First she spent a couple of weeks being rocked, sung to, bathed, dressed, and fed. She was probably not regressed because she continued to talk, did not lose toilet training, and sometimes fed*

herself. Foster mom wisely let Carrie take her time recycling this infant stage. (Being)

Then Carrie started to respond to being read to, and soon she was exploring her environment as a toddler would: touching everything, tasting everything from a new food to her shoes and her pillow, dropping things almost as quickly as she picked them up. She seemed to delight in touch, wanting to pet the skin and hair of everyone she met. Mom deliberately encouraged the touching at a four year old level by offering toys with different textures and teaching Carrie how to pet the dog. Carrie's favorite activity during those weeks was going to a big fabric store where, with freshly washed hands, she was allowed to walk through the store and touch the many textured bolts of fabric. (Doing)

Later Carrie did a spate of "no" saying and tantrums. (Independent thinking)
Then she moved to more normal four- year-old behavior. (Identity and Power) Carrie still revisited those earlier behaviors, but for increasingly shorter periods of time, and by age five was ready to start in a regular kindergarten class.

What helped Carrie? Let us theorize:

- ♦ Consistent love and structure?
- ♦ Being allowed to recycle earlier tasks at her own pace?
- ♦ Never being ridiculed or criticized for "acting little?"
- ♦ That her early damage was not so deep that she needed therapeutic support?
- ♦ That she was a particularly resilient child?
- ♦ That she and her foster family were a good temperament match?
- ♦ All of the above?

Many of us deal with children who are not abused and neglected. But we can learn some things from Carrie's experience. When our children seem to regress, it is important for us to look for causes and empathize with the child, not criticize.

Whether parents view a child acting younger than his age with empathy or distress often depends upon whether they interpret the child's behavior as regressing or as recycling.

Group Activity

Purpose: To examine the idea that children may recycle earlier tasks.

- ♦ Review the theory of recycling.
- ♦ Read or tell the examples of recycling included here. Add some of your own if you wish.
- ♦ Invite people to share stories that could illustrate recycling from their experience.
- ♦ With a poster or a handout, review the developmental tasks for the first six years. You may want to use the developmental charts from *Growing Up Again, Parenting Ourselves, Parenting Our Children*.²
- ♦ After the review of each stage, ask how that might look if it were being recycled by a school age child. For example, a seven year old who is easily distracted and can't seem to finish things could be recycling the 6-18 months exploratory tasks. An eight year old who is pushing, saying no, and seems to have more trouble dealing with feelings than he did last year could be recycling two year old separation tasks.
- ♦ Ask people to notice when their children might be recycling and to compare whether going along with it, ignoring it, or telling the child to snap out of it seems to be more supportive to the child's learning his or her developmental tasks.

ADOLESCENCE

When Adolescent Behavior is Mercurial, What is Going On?

My fourteen-year-old can act so grown up, and then suddenly he is as rebellious as a two-year-old! What is going on?

What is a Parent to Do?

When a teenager engages in quick switches of attitudes and behaviors, wise parents first explore the possibility of external causes such as school stress, consuming crushes, dipping into drugs, or peer pressure. If external pressures are deemed causal, of course parents take supportive action.

If external pressures don't account for the mood swings, the source most likely is within the youth. During adolescence the hormonal changes are powerful. The physical and emotional discomfort generated by the body as it moves from the child state toward sexual, mental, emotional and spiritual adulthood are the source of many mood switches. Teens often feel competent and reasonable one moment and grossly immature the next.

The Rhythm of Recycling

There is a rhythm to recycling. That rhythm may be interrupted by a stressful or traumatic event such as moving or a death. Such stresses often trigger a quick recycle of earlier tasks; Being, Doing, Thinking, Identity and Power, and Structure. An individual will not necessarily recycle them in order and may revisit tasks several times. But without big stresses, or in spite of them, many people can trace six or seven year recycling patterns in their lives and in some adolescents the pattern is easily recognizable. Of course the following examples will not fit for every child, but think about the behaviors and look for patterns in a teenager you know.

Puberty - Recycling Being

Twelve or thirteen or the onset of puberty, is usually a time to recycle Being - the original birth-to-six months tasks of deciding to be and to ask (call out) to be taken care of. Of course the young adolescent does not do the tasks in the same way the baby does, but sometimes the parent feels much as she did when the child was an infant. This was true for Hayden's mother.

As a twelve-year-old, Hayden had not cared much about cleaning his room, but he had been reliable and responsible about his schedules for school, sports and music. About the time his voice started to change he became moody, wasn't sure if his friends liked him, and was angry at his mom if he missed a practice session or forgot his homework. He wanted her to be there when he came home although he could never be quite sure when that would be. When she asked him to clean his room he acted as if she were requesting the impossible. He would forget to do his laundry until every sock was dirty and then be upset because his parents didn't provide him with clothing.

As Hayden's mom struggled to understand him, she wondered who this stranger was, much as she had wondered about her new infant. Watching Hayden struggle to become okay with his changing physical and emotional state, she sometimes felt as helpless as she had felt when he was an infant and she didn't know how to soothe him. Also, as this big guy leaned on her to care for him in ways she knew he could care for himself, she sometimes felt old familiar fatigue. But now she also had an annoyed impatience with his dependence.

When she was presented with the recycling theory she guessed Hayden might be recycling the Being stage. She decided to do some of the things Hayden wanted and to do them in a loving, supportive way to support his recycling. She focused especially on his food. Other things she challenged him to problem solve in order to support his growing adult capabilities.

Thirteen plus - Recycling Doing

At thirteen or thirteen and a half some children revisit the exploratory stage first visited when they were 6-18 months old. Some of these youngsters spend lots of time on the floor or in games where their bodies are piled on top of each other. Some touch everything, pick it up, handle it, put it down in a different place. They leave cereal bowls in front of the TV and drop their clothes anywhere. They can create a messy house as quickly as a toddler.

One of the things parents can do when children are recycling the Doing stage task is to remember that this stage is about exploring, not about finishing. They can also protect the young adolescent from overscheduling so there is adequate time for seemingly purposeless behavior, for hanging out.



Leslie, not yet fourteen, had to have a guitar. If she could play the guitar her life would be complete. If there was no money for lessons she would learn by herself. But she must have a guitar and a good one. It would be a friend for life.

Leslie's father, guessing that her unreasonableness signaled an episode of recycling, rented a guitar. Despite Leslie's initial wailing, she soon accepted the instrument and played it vigorously. For three months. Then she realized what she "really needed" was a set of drums.

To support recycling Doing, parents provide teens with many opportunities to try out new, safe activities and remember that finishing or carrying through will not be important to them at times.

Fourteen - Recycling Thinking

At about fourteen it is not uncommon for teenagers to recycle the negativity, resistance, and fiercely independent thinking of the two-year-old stage.

Amanda had always been an insistent child. At fourteen, she raised her determination to have things her own way to noisy, unrealistic demands alternated with stony, silent resistance.

Her parents decided to respond to her outbursts with calm insistence that she obey family rules and act like a contributing member of the family. They did not put her down or shout back. Instead they insisted that she think about what she really needed and about the effect of her behaviors on other people.

After a sudden outburst, her father commented that she looked and sounded like a two-year-old. She looked surprised, thought a moment and said, "I felt like a two-year-old." When Dad remarked that she must be learning new ways to handle her feelings and asked if she thought she would need to do more of these displays, she was thoughtful and then said, "Just a few." In fact, that was the last ten-decible outburst.

Apparently when Amanda's outbursts were not acquiesced to or overpowered, but were accepted and understood just like a two-year-old tantrum, Amanda was able to think beyond them, to do some more of that two-year-old task of giving up the belief that she is the center of the world.

To support recycling the independent thinking and appropriate handling of feelings, parents accept

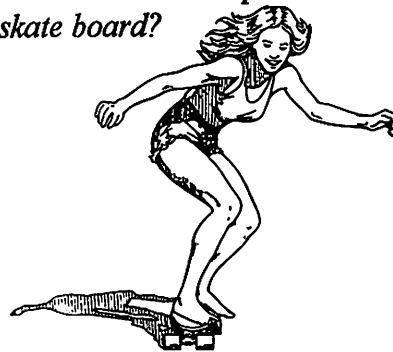
outbursts and selfish displays calmly and then insist on more grown-up behaviors.

Fifteen, Sixteen and Seventeen - Recycling Power and Identity with Teenage Tasks of Separation and Sexuality Added

As teens explore their new identities as sexual almost-adults and figure out how to be effective, several questions lie behind their sometimes perplexing behaviors.

"How do I get my needs met now? I no longer feel like a child and I see teens and adults in sexual games pushing or being pushovers, manipulating or pleasing manipulators, competing or withdrawing, or taking the wishes of others into account while still being clear about their own boundaries and values. Which will work for me? And how do I keep the values my family honors and still learn to stand separately from my parents?"

During Michael's recycling of the power and identity tasks he was often as perplexing to his father as he was to himself. Sometimes he helped in the carpentry shop and other times he made it clear he did not, not, not plan to work with his hands. But would his dad please build a new top for his skate board?



All the maneuvers Michael was trying out in his peer group he also practiced on his folks, while vigorously protesting that they did not understand him. Within two days time he pushed, manipulated, wheeled, threatened, and withdrew. Michael was right. His parents did not understand him. Mom told Dad that Michael was so preoccupied with girls that he didn't care a fig about the family. But his parents did their best to keep communication lanes open and still insist that Michael observe family values.

To support fifteen-to-seventeen-year-olds who are recycling power and identity, getting accustomed to their sexuality, and starting to separate, parents make sure their own needs are met, keep clear about family rules, go with the flow when it seems appropriate, and think about their own interests at those ages. Perhaps relating well with their parents was not high on their list of priorities at that age either.

Seventeen and Eighteen and Sometimes Fifteen and Sixteen-Recycling Structure with Separation and Sexuality Added

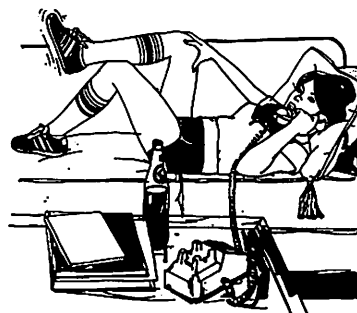
During adolescence, teens practice and add a multitude of new intellectual, social, and emotional skills. As they recycle the six-to-twelve-year-old tasks of developing independent, internalized structure, they test the rules of their peer group and/or the media against the structures of the family. Teens may be encouraged by peers and the media to think that exploring sexuality equals sexual intercourse. It does not. A teen needs time to figure out what it means to him or her to become a man or a woman before adding intercourse. One reason to discourage early sexual activity is that it can become a preoccupation that delays or skews the recycling process.

Sometimes adolescents find the family rules and values silly, rigid, or out of date. Some of those judgments, of course, are true. Other times insisting on the irrelevance of some family rules is a strategy to help older teenagers separate, to declare their independence. At the same time they will cling tenaciously to other family values. Their choice of what to keep and what to reject may bring joy or consternation to their parents, often both.

Zach looked at the values of his family and found them to his liking, so he and his parents enjoyed fairly easygoing teen years. Sometimes he kept rules, broke rules, and forgot rules. Certainly he argued with his parents, particularly about China, but generally he asked for and accepted their support as he managed the challenges of school, sports, arts, social life, and money management. However, as he neared the end of his senior year, he became preoccupied and withdrawn. He refused to talk about what he would do after high

school. His parents worried. He said his future was something he had to figure out. His parents finally told him that if he didn't go on to some kind of school and stayed at home, he would have to pay room and board. Zach looked at them with disgust and said, "You don't understand anything! Like I'd be a couch potato?" and walked off.

Each teenager finds his or her own way to separate. But separate emotionally they must if they are to become autonomous adults. Some leave home to separate; some stay at home and become independent, contributing adults. Many focus their separation on challenging family rules. Adolescents who have a loving, supportive home do not look at it as a place to escape from. They may leave but not reject the family. However, some of those teens are reluctant to leave, and have to find ways to make their parents not okay and to make a loud declaration of independence. Michael was such a person.



To support older teens recycling of the six-to-twelve-year-old structure tasks takes a willingness by the parents to let go of things that may be distasteful but are safe and to hold fast in their own lives the values that have deep meaning, for the family. This holding fast and continuing to love the son or daughter unconditionally opens the door for the young adult to establish positive adult to adult grown-up relationships with other family members.

One reason to hope adolescents don't leave home early is to give them the chance to recycle all of the tasks of birth through twelve within the family system. If the family is unable to nurture and support them, living with some other family can be a helpful resolution. Living on the street *is not*, *does not* support the recycling needed during teen years.

Recycling or A Call for Help?

How do you know when a disturbing behavior is a symptom of recycling and when it is a call for help? Our general rule is that if an undesirable behavior is unusual and does not persist it is probably a recycling behavior. If it is constant, it is time for some help. A second rule is that if an adolescent is generally a well balanced person, and the misbehavior annoys the parents but does no harm, it is probably recycling. If the behavior causes harm to the teen or the family or others, consider it a call for help.



Individual Activity

Purpose: To help parents consider recycling behavior as part of the way an adolescent learns new skills or ways to use old skills in new ways.

- * Subtract 6 or 12 from your child's age.
- * Think about what was going on in the child's life then. *At three my fifteen-year-old was full of fantasy. He thought he could be anything, do anything. Now, yes, one day he is going to be a race car driver and the next a nuclear physicist.*
- * Identify anything that was not going well at that age. *He was very pushy with other kids and snatched toys, more so than the other children in his play group.*
- * Is he learning better ways to interact now?

Group Activity

Purpose: To identify behaviors that may indicate adolescent recycling.

- * Present the theory of adolescent recycling.
- * You give or ask the group to give one example of recycling for each age group.

- * Ask each person to join a subgroup to focus on one stage.
- * Ask each subgroup to present to the whole group a scenario or a role play of one way recycling behavior in that stage might look and a way that adults can respond supportively to that behavior.

ADULTHOOD

Recycling - Children Stimulate Parents to Update Old Developmental Tasks

Growth is not a straight line up for any of us. We seem to move ahead, fall back, and move ahead again. Human growth is a cyclical process and *to recycle is to revisit in a cyclic manner the tasks of previous stages in order to move to new levels of competence, complexity or sophistication.* As adults we experience this in small ways all of the time and perhaps in dramatic, transformational ways at the transition times we call mid-life crisis and again when accepting the role of elder. Living with children also challenges us to do our recycling, to heal old wounds and to grow up in new ways.

Parenting Transforms Your Life

Beside bringing love and joy, the arrival of the first child changes parents lives in other dramatic ways often summed up as less time, less sleep, less sex. But while part of that major shift of focus from ourselves to our child is stressful, parenthood adds special breadth and wonderful depth to our lives. Our interactions, through the years with these children whose lives we guide, but who also guide ours, demand that we stretch and grow.

In *Growing With Your Child*³ Elin Schoen says *...the idea that our children provide us, as they grow, with successive opportunities that we might not otherwise have had for working through conflicts dating from when we were growing up, and thereby moving on in our personal growth, is probably as close as anyone has come to formulating a real psychodynamic of parenthood.*

³ To learn more about the many ways parents are affected and changed by the experience of parenting, read: *Growing With Your Child: Reflections on Parent Development* by Elin Schoen, NY: Main Street Books, Doubleday, 1995.

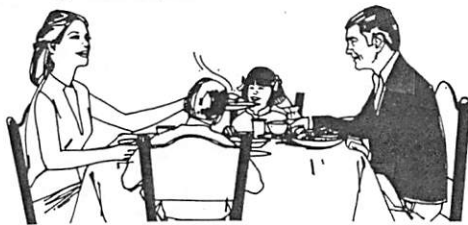
In her helpful book, Schoen documents many examples of the ways in which adults, in response to their children, experience increased creativity, self-esteem, and competence. Think about Schoen's observations and add the theory of recycling.

Recycling, A Theory of Lifelong Growth

As children present us with each new level of growth, they trigger us to examine, to rework, to refurbish whatever they are learning, to recycle the developmental tasks they are exploring. Recycling, this revisiting old developmental tasks to update them to meet the demands of adult life, can be motivated by stimuli other than our children. In her book, *Becoming the Way We Are*, Pam Levin suggests that there is a natural internal recycling rhythm of six or seven years.

In addition, we recycle tasks in response to external events. For example, the need to revisit identity formation and answer anew those old questions, *Who am I? Who are they? and What does that mean?* pushes its way to the surface regularly. Every time we experience a major life change or walk through a new life door - when we start school, leave school, get a new job, marry, have a child, divorce, lose someone close to us, retire, become a widow or widower - those old questions pop up demanding updated answers.

Each of these recycling experiences may be rather smooth if the new identity is one we desire and our original sense of identity is well grounded, or if the modeling from our family of origin for handling that change is helpful.



The experience will be less smooth, maybe downright bumpy, if our first swing at the task was interrupted by some untoward event or was somehow unsatisfactory.

Recycling in Response to Our Children

This author has observed many parents who reexamine their identity as they parent three, four,

and five year olds who are busy trying on different ways of behaving as they push toward formulating their own identity. Again, if the parents' identity challenges were satisfactorily met in their own childhood, they may find it easy to guide, empathize with, and enjoy the preschoolers as they try on roles, explore ways of resolving conflicts, and try out ways of being leaders and followers. At the same time parents will be refurbishing their own sense of identity in ways that enhance not only their parenting, but also their careers and other relationships.

If, for whatever reason, one's own childhood journey was fraught with events that prohibited a more or less satisfactory resolution of these developmental tasks, one may react with much more intensity and even with nonsupportive parenting behaviors around those issues. Parents may become too controlling, too permissive, or may feel overly anxious.

Adam's Father Left- Unfinished Business at Age Two

When Adam was two, the age at which he was vigorously asserting his own separate psychological position, his father left. It was as if the wrong person separated. When Adam's son was two, Adam experienced extreme distress over his son's new independence and didn't have easy, automatic ways to guide the child through his "no" saying and his tantrums.

Intense distress over a facet of our child's growth can be viewed as a signal that we need to give some extra attention to our need to grow up again in that area. Adam may do this by himself, by deliberately being aware of what he is doing and of getting what he needs or he may use the help of friends, a support group, a parenting class, or a counselor.

The Not So Difficult Eights

One clue to a need to give special support to our recycling is the awareness that at some age our child seems difficult for us.

Aileen enjoyed caring for her children when they were young. But when her oldest child was eight, she felt burdened and unsuccessful as a mother.

Aileen decided that eight was a difficult age. Her decision was reinforced when her second child was troublesome as an eight year old, although he was not as hard to understand as his older brother. When her third child turned nine, Aileen realized she had rather enjoyed the eight year old and wondered what had happened to "the difficult eights."

Intrigued, Aileen asked her mother what had happened in their family the year she was eight. Her mother recalled a very difficult year with illness, financial worries, and a painful betrayal. Not much time to care for an eight year old.

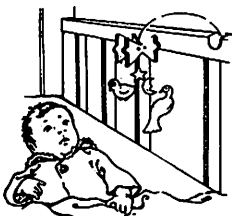
The differences in Aileen's experiences with her three eight year olds may have been due to their differences in temperament, but Aileen guessed, when she learned about the idea of recycling, that it was also due to the growing and healing she had done as her sons triggered her to redo, in a better way, the eight year old tasks of recycling independent thinking and handling feelings.

Mother's Absence- Trauma at 17 Months

Sometimes when a child, especially a child of the same sex as the parent, hits a certain age, it can set off a strong emotion about an old loss. If we don't understand the intensity of our emotion or the timing of it, the question, *What went on when I was my child's age?* may be helpful.

When Mary's daughter was 17 months old Mary was overcome with a deep sadness that she had no explanation for and couldn't seem to shake. When a friend asked, "What happened to you at your daughter's age," Mary replied, "Nothing special." Then she remembered the family stories about the time her mother left for a month to take care of her dying father and how despondent baby Mary had been. An aunt calculated from Grandpa's death date that Mary would have been about seventeen months old.

Mary felt better after she completed her grieving about her infant loss of connection with her mother.



Boarding School- Loss of Control

When Paul's son was ready to start first grade, Paul became so depressed that it interfered with his ability to think, to accomplish things, to finish projects. He had the feeling that he didn't really understand what was going on and he felt out of control. A year before he had been firmly in control of his job and enjoying it, and the job hadn't changed. When Paul got a negative work review he sought the help of a counselor. Their discussions led nowhere until the counselor asked, "What happened to you when you were your son's age?" Paul went suddenly pale and said quietly, "My parents were missionaries in Asia and I was sent to France to boarding school. I didn't understand why and I felt completely out of control for years. Maybe that's why I've become such a control freak. But it isn't working now."

Paul worked through his grief about being separated from his family, his performance at work improved and he had more energy to parent his son.

One of the gifts that our children give us is the chance to enhance tasks we learned well. Another gift is the push to rework what did not go well the first time around.

Using Recycling to Help Us Understand Our Child's Behavior

Another elegant outcome of our propensity to recycle what our children are doing is the clues it can give us about what is going on with them.

Janice told her parenting group about eighteen month old Katlin's sudden change in behavior. Usually easygoing and agreeable, Katlin had been cranky at day care for days in a row and extra demanding at home. Group members asked Janice what was different.

Well, I've been forgetting to take her blanket. She may be teething again. She is over her cold so that isn't it. The other children at day care are a bit older than she is and are pushing like two year olds do. Maybe she is imitating them.

One member asked, "Do you think it might be that she misses the comfort of her blanket?"

Maybe.

The teeth?

Could be. Anybody got any other ideas?

Well, she is moving toward the two year old stage when children begin to learn that they are not the center of the universe and it makes them mad. Could that be it?

Well, that makes me mad! I hate that in my life right now!

The first questions Janice had answered in a quiet, even voice. On the last one she shifted in her chair, set her jaw, and spoke vehemently. Could it be that Janice is closely in tune with her little daughter and is reflecting what is most pressing for Katlin? It is worth watching. Meanwhile, Janice can help Katlin start to deal with not being the center of everything by learning about delayed gratification. Janice can offer *when...then you...* or *after...you can...* instead of *I am hurrying to satisfy you* messages.

Janice can also learn new things about how to be important in her world without needing to be the controlling center of it.

Always Another Chance

This is the wonderful exchange of parenting. With our guidance our children learn the skills they need, and with their nudging we enhance old skills and are signaled to heal old wounds. The result is permanent changes in our attitudes and behaviors and interests.

We may even be able to break an old family cycle of abuse and neglect as we change the way we parent our children and the way we care for ourselves.

Group Activity

I Do Parents Recycle Tasks Their Children Are Doing?

Purpose: To examine the theory of recycling against our own lives.

- ♦ Present the theory of recycling and the ideas that parents are apt to recycle what their children are going through.
- ♦ Present the group with a handout or a poster review of the tasks of children's developmental stages. You can use the

developmental charts in *Growing Up Again, Parenting Ourselves, Parenting Our Children*.

- ♦ Ask each parent to examine the tasks for the stage his or her child is in and notice if any of those resonate with something going on for the adult at home or at work, something that is emotionally charged with excitement or enjoyment or resistance or resentment.
- ♦ Ask people to share their observations in small groups or large, depending on the number of participants.
- ♦ Ask people to share their responses to the theory of recycling, remembering that a theory is not a fact, it is a model devised to help us understand our own and other people's attitudes, feelings and behaviors.

II Can our intensity about a recycling task help us understand what is going on with our child?

Purpose: To consider whether intense feelings of joy, anxiety, or resistance to a child's developmental tasks can help us understand that child.

- ♦ Read the story about Janice and Katlin.
- ♦ Ask if someone who is currently having a problem with a child is willing to let the group ask questions and give suggestions.
- ♦ Ask the group to watch for differences in the intensity of the person's responses to the suggestions and questions.
- ♦ After everyone has had the chance to ask a question or make a suggestion, ask people to share their observations on intensity.
- ♦ Ask the person with the problem to take this information home and see if it is helpful in the resolution of the problem.

Please remember to send recycling stories you wish to share to WE.

Thank you,



Opening Activity

To Encourage People to Think About the Concept of *Recycling*

Hand out name tags and ask people to:

- Choose a partner. Make a name tag for her and ask her to tell you about one time she observed a child acting "younger than his age."
- Introduce your partner and tell the group what she observed if she is willing for you to share that information.

Closing Activity

To Encourage People to Claim Their Learning About *Recycling*

At the end of the meeting, briefly review the activities of the meeting.

- Ask several people to tell about some behavior that might indicate that someone is recycling.
- Ask for Resentments. Listen to resentments, do not defend or explain.
- Ask for Appreciations.

Leader Guides

Additional ways to teach about recycling are included in the six session Leader Guide for use by educators, *Growing Up Again, Helping Ourselves, Helping Our Children*, by Jean Illsley Clarke.

The ten session Leader Guide for use by mental health professionals in a therapeutic setting, *Growing Up Again Facilitator's Manual: A Course In Being An Affirming Parent To Your Children And Yourself*.

They are available from Daisy Press, 16535 9th Ave N, Minneapolis, Mn 55447
Phone/fax 612 473-1840.

WE

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