

THE RIGHT TO BE UNHAPPY

Three times recently, while working with parents, I was reminded of something a psychoanalyst friend told me a few years ago. This man, then in his late 50's, was reflecting on the way he had raised his own children. "If I could do it over again," he said, "I would not be so afraid to let my children be unhappy at times. My own feelings, when the children showed the least displeasure, got in my way and then I misapplied some of the psychological concepts I had learned. Now I know that I weakened my children by thinking that I had to try and make sure they'd be happy at all times."

Many parents seem to be able to bear almost anything except evidence of a child's frustration, displeasure, boredom or other unhappiness. And because strong feelings are aroused in the parents when the child is unhappy, the parents immediately try to come to the rescue of the child almost as if to say: "I'll do anything. Just don't cry, just don't be sad."

Like my analyst friend, I have found that I'm not really helping children with that kind of attitude. First of all, being frustrated, being disappointed, being lonely, being worried, being unhappy, are all part and parcel of the human condition. Knowing how to deal with painful feelings by problem solving, by learning how to bounce back from adversity, by dealing productively with stress are what each of us has to learn to do for ourselves. The research during the last decade or so on stress clearly shows that we learn to deal with stress (something we have to do to survive) by first dealing with reasonable amounts of it while being emotionally supported in our struggle. Yes, that's a tough one and I'm sorry. "I can see you feel badly." "I know you'll find a way which is your very own way to deal with that problem," and other similar remarks can be very supportive, as can just a look or a touch or simply being there.

Another point is that if parents come to child's aid too often and too consistently, they say to the children that having negative feelings is not only terrible in and of itself, rather than a normal life process, but that for children to have these feelings is terribly upsetting to the parents. The children may then learn to protect the parents by not letting themselves experience sad feelings, with the possible effect of limiting their range of feelings altogether. Or, some children may learn to manipulate the parents to get their own way, which is also not strengthening.

Another reason it doesn't work to come to the rescue too quickly or too often when children are unhappy is because we can't "make" someone else happy. Being happy (or unhappy for that matter) is a feeling each of us generates in our own selves. Someone else can "invite" us to experience happiness by something they do or say but we can reject the invitation. For example, we can feel that a compliment was phony or undeserved, and then we prevent ourselves from feeling happy. Or we can feel that we don't like a particular gift or privilege, or that people only said what they said to make themselves feel good. Therefore, trying to "make someone else happy" may not make them happy at all.