

The Impact of Formative Experiences

Many folks bemoan the fact that with all the years spent in school, there are no classes on being a spouse or parent. Many others have said, “You need a license to drive a car, but there is no test for becoming a mom or dad.”

While these statements are true, we are none-the-less taught how to be a spouse and we are taught how to parent. The teaching is by way of example and it comes at the hands of our own parents or caregivers from the moment we are born and then raised. We refer to this as formative experiences.

Formative experience is the everyday life we lived growing up and the know-how we develop as a result. More often than not, the know-how develops beyond our awareness. We simply react or do the things we do, based on a familiarity, having seen or experienced something like it before.

Apart from harm to a child in the moment of abuse, there is a lasting harm in that the abusive experience sets the stage for the child to act similarly when faced with a similar situation as an adult. There is a sense of “doing what comes naturally” (or as familiar) even if what one is doing is recognized as harmful. In the absence of having been taught appropriate means of managing child behaviour or resolving interpersonal conflict, some people fall back onto the strategies learned through formative experience. If you had proper, reasonable and decent formative experiences, that’s good. If not, there is an elevated risk of managing parenting or spousal relationships as you experienced from childhood. Everything that happens to a person as a child, can effect how they manage life as an adult.

Interestingly, even when looking at divorce, if one’s parents were divorced, whether low conflict or high conflict, there is an elevated risk that the child of those divorced parents will get divorced as an adult too.

The message here is powerful. From what children are exposed to, so shall they learn and so may they do. This is not to say all adults with untoward childhood experiences are doomed to repeat them, but it is to say that there is an elevated risk in much

the same way as some people experience harm from second hand smoke while others do not.

Hence the rationale of eliminating child abuse and improving parental (spousal) relationships is not just for the protection of children in the here and now, but as an investment in their future and other future generations.

The good news is that those folks whose formative experiences left them with questionable parenting or relationship skills can improve with help and support.

Adults who were abused or exposed to abusive behaviour between their parents as children, where it appears to be affecting life through parenting skills or relationships, are advised to consider individual, family counseling, parenting courses, marital therapy or the like. The goal of these strategies is to challenge the formative experiences in favor of adopting new appropriate, directly learned strategies for managing parenting demands and getting along with others.

There is an old adage, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks”, so thank goodness, we aren’t dogs! People can learn new tricks and can improve upon formative experiences of the past.

Adults with untoward formative experiences affecting adult life deserve better, their children deserve better and their children – the future grandchildren deserve better too.

If you know someone with these issues, tell them you know a family, individual and couple counselor that has almost 50 years experience who would be willing to consult with them. Give them my card and ask them if they would like me to call them.

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