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2018

Unconditional Love and Evil Stepmothers: How Parents are Heroes and Villains

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/scott_allison/76/

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UNCONDITIONAL LOVE AND EVIL STEPMOTHERS: HOW PARENTS ARE HEROES AND VILLAINS

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Once upon a time, in a faraway kingdom, there was a beautiful girl. She was the only daughter of a widowed, successful man. One day, her father decided to remarry, bringing a stepmother and two stepsisters into the young girl's life. The evil stepmother and stepsisters treated the girl poorly, forcing her to become their maid. Our young hero was eventually able to escape her situation with the help of a fairy godmother and some singing animals, and she lived happily ever after.

The tale of Cinderella is one that appears time and time again, spanning different cultures and times (Northup, 2000). The Grimm version has her stepsisters cutting off portions of their feet in order to fit into a golden slipper; a version from Nigeria has Cinderella being rewarded for her modesty compared to her greedy stepsisters; a version from an Iraqi folktale has Cinderella preparing for a wedding, receiving help from a red fish, and marrying the brother of the

bride after he finds her sandal. In China, a young girl befriends a bunch of magical fish, who help her prepare for a festival. The girl leaves a shoe behind, which the king finds. The king catches her when she tries to steal back her shoe, but they fall in love. A version from Ancient Egypt is one of the oldest; a slave girl kidnapped from Greece is our Cinderella. A slipper of hers is stolen by a falcon and dropped in the pharaoh's lap, who then vows to find the slipper's owner and make her queen of Egypt. They all follow the same pattern: a young girl is tormented by evil, most commonly her stepmother, but manages to escape and move onto bigger and better things.

There is a trope regarding how the hero overcomes the evil stepmother (or stepfather) in our stories. Snow White's stepmother ordered her to be killed so that she could be the fairest of them all. In the movie *The Parent Trap*, the girls fight off their would-be evil stepmother, who is trying to take advantage of their father. Sherlock Holmes fights off an evil stepfather in *The Speckled Band* as the stepfather tries to kill his stepdaughters so that he won't have to split the inheritance of their mother's fortune. In the movie *Kingsman: The Secret Service*, Eggsy's stepfather threatens him and is abusive toward his mother. Eggsy is able to drive away his stepfather and rescue his mother by the end of the movie. While not technically a stepmother, Mrs. Reed treats her non-blood related niece, Jane, very poorly in *Jane Eyre*, and favors her own children heavily.

Surprisingly, the idea of "evil stepmothers" has some factual basis. There is evidence showing that stepparents treat their stepchildren worse than biological children. Daly and Wilson (2011) conducted a comprehensive study on the "Cinderella effect". They found that in multiple countries, stepparents far more frequently cause fatal batterings of small children than biological parents. U.S. FBI data from 2004 shows that stepfathers beat children at a rate of 55.9 per million children at risk, compared to the rate of 5.6 per million children for genetic fathers. These numbers are likely actually higher, due to the fact that only registered stepfathers are counted in the data, not including boyfriends or other partners of the mother. Stepparents are also far more likely to be non-lethal abusers to their stepchildren.

But why do stepchildren get treated so poorly in the first place? What differentiates a stepchild from a biological child? Why should any child be treated badly, at all? As our survey found, Millennials consider parents to be their heroes and

their villains. Parents can be supporters and cheerleaders, encouraging their children on to greatness and success. However, there can be a darker side to parenthood. When parents fail at their jobs, when they fall short of properly caring for and giving support to their children, they risk becoming vilified in the eyes of their own children. Some parents can be considered objectively evil, especially when they bring harm to their children or others.

In this chapter, I will discuss how parents are biologically driven to protect, care for, and motivate their children to success. These same biological drives may also hurt children, especially in the case of stepparents. Parents face considerable social pressure when deciding how to raise their child. Many parents get trapped in fads and in the idea that there is a perfect way to raise a child – and some ways may indeed do more harm than others. When taking parental fads to the extreme, parents run into the risk of harming their own children. Sometimes parents may abandon their own offspring, whether it be because of lack of resources or interest, which could be seen as a villainous action. Adoption can also be seen as potentially heroic. Sometimes, children with villainous parents may choose to remove themselves from the parent-child relationship. This chapter will also discuss and define the difference between heroic, villainous, good, and bad parents, and it will offer a theoretical account of the spectrum of good and bad parenting.

INSTINCT AND REJECTION

Biological Drive

Humans have a tendency to promote the well-being of those with whom we are genetically related. They do so to increase their individual fitness and make sure that their own offspring survive (Darwin, 1872). Lorenz (1943) theorized that humans have a *Kindchenschema*, an inherent instinct to nurture those with infantile features. This instinct suggests that we devote more care to our young, ensuring that our species is more reproductively successful.

However, this biological drive may drive some parents and caregivers to neglect those with whom they are not biologically related. Fox et al. (2009) found that grandmothers treated their maternal grandchildren more favorably

than others due to the fact that they share a larger proportion of genetic code with their kin. As we mentioned earlier, step families offer data supporting the idea that parents treat biological children better than they do non-biological children. The presence of a stepchild could potentially draw time and resources away from their own existing or potential genetic offspring, therefore stepparents have much less motivation to treat their stepchildren well. Not all stepparents will be abusive, but as discussed earlier, they seem to be abusive at a more frequent rate as compared to biological parents.

Becoming a Parent

Expectations largely shape how well the transition to parenthood proceeds for men and women. Delmore-Ko et al. (2000) found that women who were aware of the difficulties of raising a child, but who were not fearful of the task, experienced lower levels of stress and higher self-esteem than those who were overly scared or who thought that caring for an infant would be easy. Delmore-Ko et al. also found differences in the way men and women think about their future children. Women in the study tended to think more about the immediate consequences and challenges that come with raising an infant while men talked about parenthood in a more long-term manner, focusing more on later stages of development beyond infancy and early childhood.

Rejection and Abandonment

Why would a parent reject their biological child? Some parents don't have enough resources to raise a child. The amount of resources available to soon-to-be parents plays a large role in how parenthood will affect them. Nomaguchi and Milkie (2003) found that in general, married women's outcomes across a variety of measures improved after having a child; married men's outcomes remained the same while unmarried men and woman were generally worse off. There may be cases where the paternity of the child may be uncertain, which may cause fathers not to provide the maximum potential amount of care they are able to. Fathers tend to invest more time and care toward infants who were found to look and smell more like them (Alvergne, Faurie, & Raymond, 2009). To minimize this effect, mothers have been found to use psychological tactics to form a connection between children and her

partner. For example, mothers may mention how similar the father and infant look (Bressan, 2002).

In some cases, a certain child may take remarkably more effort to raise, or may not fit the ideals that the parent has mapped out in their head of what their child will look like. Jennifer Rabiner (2011) describes her struggles with raising a child that she didn't like:

"A mom is never, ever supposed to admit this, but here goes: I've never liked my child. Growing up, I had hoped to someday have a daughter, and I had a clear vision of what she would be like: vivacious, spunky, and whip-smart, socially savvy and self-assured. What I got was the polar opposite... I might have thought I was lacking a maternal instinct, but when my second daughter was born, I was blown away by overwhelming Mommy Love. Lilah was exactly the baby I'd envisioned... A moment of reckoning came when Sophie was 4, at a playdate with my best friend and her daughter. I was judging Sophie as usual, criticizing how she was painting with the stick part of the paintbrush instead of the bristles, when my friend turned to me and said point-blank: "You are Sophie's mother. You're supposed to be her rock -- the person she can count on most in the world for unconditional love and support. It doesn't matter if you like her or not; you still have to support her." I started to cry, because I knew she was right. And deep down, I was ashamed of how easily I had betrayed my own daughter."

Rabner (2011) was acting with unintended villainy towards Sophie. She was trying to do right by her and connect, but was unable to for many years, harming her child's emotional state in the process, especially with her clear preference towards her other daughter. When Sophie was 7 years-old, doctors discovered that Sophie had a hormone imbalance, which was contributing to her erratic behaviors, anxiety, and delayed growth. With the conflict changed from "mother vs. child" to "mother and child vs. diagnosis", Rabner's attitude toward her daughter remarkably improved, and their relationship was on its way to being repaired.

Parents may abandon their own child for reasons similar to those of Rabner, in that they are unable to connect with their child. Both mothers and fathers alike can experience postpartum depression anywhere within the first year after a child's birth. The exact cause is unknown, but stress and hormone imbalances have been strongly considered to play a role. Parents may not have enough

resources to allocate to their child, and may believe that their child will be better off with another family.

Parents may be in the process of divorcing or remarrying, and may choose to focus on their new potential family, rejecting their biological child in the process. Parents may see their child as an extension of the person they're leaving, or as a hindrance to their future plans of starting their lives over. In some cases, children may find themselves rejected by both divorced parents as both parents move on to create new families.

Social Pressures

There is no question: parenting is a remarkably stressful job with enormous responsibility. A parent is responsible for ensuring that their child grows up well and becomes a productive member of society. Many parents wish there was a "magic secret", a simple and miraculous strategy that they can use that will ensure their child's success. This is the largest drive behind different parenting fads, theories on how to parent that have a tendency to sweep through society and dictate how parents should raise their children. Parents may feel extreme pressure to conform to the way their social group raises its children. Parents may also raise their children in the same style with which that they were raised.

THE FOUR PARENTING STYLES

There are 4 types of parenting styles that are generally accepted by child psychologists: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and uninvolved (Baumrind, 1966; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Authoritarian parents tend to have a more parent-driven focus, in which the parent makes a large number of decisions for the child with little input from the child. Permissive parents let their child dictate decisions. These parents are often described as wanting to be the child's best friend. Authoritative parents lie somewhere in the middle of the two; they set clear guidelines, but still allow the child to have some agency. Uninvolved parents have little to no input or interest in their child's life. Uninvolved parents have a tendency to be neglectful, or may pass on parenting duties to a surrogate, such as another parent, family member, friend, or hired help such as a nanny. Parenting fads tend to fall under the authoritarian and permissive styles.

Authoritarian Fads

Authoritarian fads focus on using harsh discipline to motivate your children to maximize their full potential for success. “Hothousing”, a process in which parents train their children in attempts to produce early genius in literacy and numeracy, has been around since the 1980s. Parents played classical music for their children in the 1990s, in hopes that it would boost their children’s academic abilities. Millennials have often been characterized by being raised by “helicopter parents” who advocate for and micromanage their children’s lives into early adulthood and their children’s college years.

One of the more recent examples of this fad, and a style that many Millennial parents use themselves, is found in the book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (Chua, 2011). This book appears to advocate that parents should use a harsh regimen and high expectations to achieve academic excellence. Some authoritarian parents may recommend that parents physically strike a child as a form of discipline. One example of this practice is outlined in *To Train Up Your Child* (Pearl & Pearl, 1994), which says parents should “switch” (hit with a small stick or cord) infants as young as 4 or 5 months for disobedience, crying, and hitting. The social and emotional wellbeing of the child is rarely taken into account with these methods.

Permissive Fads

Permissive parents are the opposite of authoritarian ones; they tend to focus on emotional well-being rather than academic success. The French method described in *Bringing Up Bébé* (Druckerman, 2012) recommends that you should treat your adult like a miniature adult. Parents should have discussions with their children and explain their actions. For example, when changing an infant’s diaper, the parent should explain to the child that they are now going to change their diaper because the diaper is dirty. In this method of childrearing, children are never given pacifiers, high chairs or even toys. The theory states that children should learn right away how to use adult objects, and that they don’t need an in-between step. However, this is all done to produce an autonomous child at an earlier age. Those who follow Resources for Infant Educators (RIE) advocate for parents to do less and to allow children to learn on their own with minimal parental guidance other than to help facilitate what the child is currently doing (Gerber & Johnson, 1998). In attachment parenting, parents and children spend

all of their time with one another and form a close bond. “Skinship”, or skin-to-skin contact, is extremely important.

Parents may choose to have their infants and children sleep in the same bed as them rather than separating the child into a crib or own bed. Breastfeeding is considered critically important to attachment parents, since they believe that a bond is formed between mother and child through the process. Some parents may take breastfeeding to extreme levels by extending the breastfeeding period long past the point where the child is eating solid foods, or into a child’s elementary years. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends breastfeeding until 6 months, after which it should be supplemented with solid foods for at least a year. They do not give an end date for breastfeeding, stating that, “Babies should continue to breastfeed... for as long as is mutually desired by the mother and the baby” (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2017). The World Health Organization also recommends exclusive breastfeeding until 6 months, but advocates breastfeeding with supplemental food until age two or beyond (World Health Organization, 2017). However, there have been no negative medical effects found for extended breastfeeding for both mothers and children. Attachment parents say that they breastfeed until their children wean themselves. As one attachment parent notes:

“In our experience, breastfeeding has not been extreme in the least. As a child starts getting more nutrition from food and less from breast milk, the amount of time she nurses decreases. I’m not nursing my 4-year-old multiple times a day. Heck, he rarely nurses multiple times a week — he might ask to nurse for a few minutes at bedtime once every week or two... My son is no more dependent on me because he has nursed for four years than the child who never breastfed.” (Ford, 2012)

However, it should be noted that permissive fads are not without their faults. In some cases, allowing a child to have too much freedom can have disruptive results and can get out of control rather quickly:

“But during a RIE snack time, recalls Annabelle Gurwitch, author of the essay collection I See You Made an Effort, a situation developed that wasn’t quite as amusing. A child, naked except for his diaper and huge, like a baby Spartacus, started shoving huge tables at the babies on the floor. In fact, he was able to pick one up and hurl it towards the babies. All the mothers looked panicked, but no one said anything: we were supposed to never interfere. Finally, I stood up and said, ‘Are you fucking

kidding me? This is dangerous.' I picked my kid up and took him out of the circle, and all the other mothers followed. Attica! Attica!" (Grigoriadis, 2014)

Balancing the Styles

While children need some amount of freedom and control over their own lives, they still need parental guidance to steer them in the right direction. This balance of control between parent and child is known as authoritative parenting, which is generally accepted as the type of parenting style that tends to have the best outcomes for children. The parenting styles discussed above all have various degrees of merit when used in moderation. Being overly permissive with a child will cause them to run amok, and being overly strict will dampen their creativity. Regardless, most styles of parenting will not have severe impacts on children. Children raised in one specific style will likely not have a significant competitive advantage over another, and in a field full of conflicting advice, parents can be easily overwhelmed. An overwhelmed parent Ava Neyer ranted about the advice she received when her child was having trouble sleeping:

"Don't let your baby sleep too long, except when they've been napping too much, then you should wake them. Never wake a sleeping baby. Any baby problem can be solved by putting them to bed earlier, even if they are waking up too early. If your baby wakes up too early, put them to bed later or cut out a nap. Don't let them nap after 5 p.m. Sleep begets sleep, so try to get your child to sleep as much as possible. Put the baby to bed awake but drowsy. Don't wake the baby if it fell asleep while nursing.... Sleep when the baby sleeps. Clean when the baby cleans. Don't worry. Stress causes your baby stress and a stressed baby won't sleep." (Dube, 2013)

Ultimately, parents should do what works best for themselves and their children. There is no one style of parenting or key piece of advice that will ensure that a child will be significantly more successful than others. However, harm can be caused to children when parental beliefs are taken to the extreme.

WHEN PARENTAL BELIEFS BRING HARM

There is a small subset of the population who believes that vaccination is harmful to their children, despite very large consensus and evidence proving the value of vaccination. Resistance to vaccination has been around for almost as long

as vaccines themselves have existed (Wolfe & Sharpe, 2002). The most recent vaccination and most publicized vaccination movement started with Andrew Wakefield's publication of a fraudulent research paper that linked the MMR vaccine with autism spectrum disorder (Wakefield et al., 1998). The paper has long since been disproved and redacted, but the belief still persists today. This is partially due to celebrity advocacy and misinformation that still circulates. One fourth of all parents say that they have some trust in celebrities as a source for vaccine-safety information, and 2% say they have a lot of trust in celebrities as a source (Freed et al., 2011). Jenny McCarthy is one of the most well-known proponents of the anti-vaccination movement, claiming that her son became autistic as a result of the MMR vaccination. Even President Trump has perpetuated misinformation about vaccinations in 2014, tweeting "If I were President I would push for proper vaccination but would not allow one time massive shots that a small child cannot take – AUTISM" (Trump, 2014).

Those who believe in the message of the anti-vaccination movement tend to have a distrust of doctors and scientists, and they tend to get all of their "facts" from biased websites. Websites tend to assert "that vaccines cause illness; they are ineffective; they are part of a medical, pharmaceutical, and government conspiracy; and that mainstream medicine is incorrect or corrupt" (Kata, 2012). When asked about reasons for not vaccinating their children, parents listed "fears vaccines might cause harm or overload the immune system; believing their child was not at risk for the disease, or that the disease was not dangerous; that it was better to develop immunity naturally rather than from vaccines; or that the vaccines might not work." All of these beliefs mirror information that can be found on anti-vaccination websites (Kata, 2012). As McCarthy herself says about websites:

"I get criticized a lot from "the other side," -- I hate having to say that -- but the neuroscience world [for] using Google. To me, Google is one of the most incredible breakthroughs that we have today. Yes, it can scare a lot of patients, thinking we're all dying because we look up something on Google. But there's also a lot of anecdotal information from parents, firsthand accounts of what they did for their own child. And I'm so grateful, because like I said, if I didn't click on Generation Rescue's Web site, I never would have found how to help heal Evan." (McCarthy, 2015)

It is clear that the misinformation campaign can yield extremely harmful effects. Not vaccinating children puts others at extreme risk. When the majority of

people in a community have been vaccinated, it provides community immunity, more commonly known as herd immunity, for those who are not vaccinated. As defined by the CDC, herd immunity is “A situation in which a sufficient proportion of a population is immune to an infectious disease (through vaccination and/or prior illness) to make its spread from person to person unlikely. Even individuals not vaccinated (such as newborns and those with chronic illnesses) are offered some protection because the disease has little opportunity to spread within the community” (Center for Disease Control, 2016).

When a significant proportion of a community remains unvaccinated, diseases can spread quickly. In January of 2015, an unvaccinated child who was a carrier for measles visited Disneyland in California. By February, there were a total of 125 reported cases of measles. Of the 110 measles patients who were Californian, 45% were unvaccinated. Of the unvaccinated patients, “Twelve were infants too young to be vaccinated. Among the 37 remaining vaccine-eligible patients, 28 (67%) were intentionally unvaccinated because of personal beliefs, and one was on an alternative plan for vaccination” (Zipprich et al., 2015). Non-vaccination not only exposes those who choose not to vaccinate their children to a range of deadly diseases, it also put those who are unable to receive the vaccine for other reasons at risk. As Carl Krawitt, whose son is unable to be vaccinated as he recovers from chemotherapy, stated, “It’s very emotional for me... If you choose not to immunize your own child and your own child dies because they get measles, okay, that’s your responsibility, that’s your choice. But if your child gets sick and gets my child sick and my child dies, then ... your action has harmed my child” (Aliferis, 2015).

Jehovah’s Witnesses are a religious group who believe, among other things, that you shouldn’t ingest blood in any form, including blood found in transfusions. Parents often fight with their doctors for their right to refuse blood transfusions on behalf of their child. Adolescents may fight for their right to refuse, despite the beliefs of their parents or their doctor. Different countries have different policies on how to address this issue. In the United States, the welfare of the child always takes precedent over parental beliefs (Woolley, 2005). Legal cases retain three main points: the child’s interests and those of the state outweigh parental rights to refuse medical treatment, parental rights do not give parents life and death authority over their children, and parents do not have an absolute right to refuse medical treatment for their children based on their religious beliefs (Woolley, 2005). In cases where an adolescent wants to refuse medical treatment, but a parent wants to advocate for it, there is no consensus. In the few cases where

minors are given the right to refuse treatment despite their parents, it's noted that this is not an absolute doctrine, and individual judges needed to determine if the child was mature enough to make the decision. Most often, judges in these cases will rule that adolescents are not mature enough to understand the consequences of their decisions, and will force treatment (Woolley, 2005).

The book *To Train Up a Child*, as discussed earlier in the section on authoritarian parenting, has been linked to the deaths of at least three adoptive children whose parents used these methods to the extreme. The children were Sean Paddock, Lydia Schatz, and Hana Grace-Rose Williams. Sean Paddock suffocated after his mother bound blankets around him too tightly, to prevent him from getting out of bed in the middle of the night (WRAL, 2008). At the trial, it was revealed that the mother regularly hit the children with flexible plastic rods, following Pearl's method and breaking the adoption agency's "no-hitting" policy. She even forced one of her other children to eat their own vomit (WRAL, 2008). Seven-year-old Lydia Schatz was beaten to death by her adoptive parents because she mispronounced a word (Martinez, 2010). Her sister was beaten into critical condition for "being a liar and bad influence" (Martinez, 2010). Fourteen-year-old Hana Grace-Rose Williams was found dead outside her home, naked. Witnesses at the Williams parents' trial said that the Williams family followed *To Train Up a Child's* advice "to use a switch, cold baths, withhold food and force children outside in cold weather as punishment" (Stoll, 2013). Some of the Williams' other children reported being hit by their mother, and that some of the adopted children were forced to shower outside with a garden hose (Stoll, 2013).

There is little question that parents have an enormous influence on their children; after all, they are the ones making decisions on their children's behalf until the children come of age. Children are completely dependent on their parents for the entirety of their adolescence, and even upon reaching adulthood many children still rely on their parents for some support. These supportive parents may exhibit the great eight heroic traits as identified by Allison and Goethals (2011). Supportive parents also may follow Messick's (2005) exchange model of leaders and followers with their children, and lead their children by example into the world of heroism and good.

Is someone who mistreats his or her child automatically a villain? The parent might not have malicious intent behind their actions. They may believe that they

are helping their child, whether by preventing mental illness, or saving their soul, or teaching them right from wrong. But mistreatment may overtly harm the child or put others at significant risk. This idea will be developed further below.

WHEN PARENTS AREN'T THERE

Abuse and Neglect

Child abuse and neglect, as defined by the United States Government is “any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, seriously physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation” or “an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Abuse isn’t just the act of directly physically harming a child, as discussed in the *To Train Up a Child* cases. It can also take the form of emotional abuse, or neglect, in which the child is indirectly harmed as a result of parental action or inaction. The line between abuse and physical discipline can be hard to define. In some states, as long as physical discipline is reasonable and causes no bodily injury to the child, it does not fall under the label of abuse (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). When a child is harmed, it falls under this chapter’s definition of parental villainy, as will be further discussed below.

Abuse and neglect can have severe negative impacts on the outcome of a child. Adolescents and young adults with a history of childhood maltreatment were three times more likely to become depressed or suicidal (Brown et al., 1999). Children who experienced abuse and neglect performed more poorly than those who did not, “having lower grades, more suspensions, more disciplinary referrals, and more grade repetitions, even when controlling for gender of child and SES” (Kendal-Tackett & Eckenrode, 1996). Child sexual abuse, in particular, is linked to higher rates of PTSD, depression, suicide, sexual promiscuity, perpetration of the abuse, and academic performance difficulties (Paolucci, Genuis & Violato, 2001).

Fostering and Adoption

If abandoning a child physically or mentally makes you a villain, does adopting a child make you a hero? Providing a home for a child who needs it is

certainly a noble act. Adoption can be extremely beneficial for both parents and children. Children who are adopted tend to fare better than those who are placed in foster or institutional care (Triselitois & Hill, 1990). Recent research suggests that adoptive children do not show increased risk for psychological, educational, and behavioral problems (Borders, Black, & Pasley, 1998). Having a good, positive adoptive family can help to heal emotional and physical trauma, and can reverse developmental deficits (Johnson, 2002).

However, adopting a child does not automatically make one a hero. The victims in the *To Train Up a Child* abuse cases were all adopted. The biological children in these cases were also mistreated, but to a lesser extent in comparison to their adopted siblings. Parents who embody the heroic traits of caring and selflessness (Allison & Smith, 2015) may be more likely to adopt, but being caring isn't a requirement for adoption. Parents may choose to adopt children for selfish reasons, such as "proving you are liberal," "wanting to do something noble," or "taking a stand against the population explosion" (Simon & Altstein, 2000). Adopting selfishly doesn't necessarily make someone a bad parent, but it takes away from the heroic glamour.

When the Child Leaves

Harry Potter says goodbye his adoptive, abusive family in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (Rowling, 2007) and has no intention of contacting them again. In real life, adult children may slowly stop talking to their parents and choose to go "no-contact" with them, stopping all communication and interaction. These children may find parental figures in other places; in Harry's case, Dumbledore was his parental figure. Adolescents may choose to run away from their homes, usually to escape abuse (Janus et al, 1987). Parental alienation syndrome is a theory proposed to describe how children drive away their own parents, usually due to one parent encouraging their child to stay away from the other, especially in cases involving divorce (Gardner, 1998).

HEROIC AND VILLAINOUS PARENTS

In terms of heroism science, it could be said that parents meet two of the three ways that heroes transform (Allison & Goethals, 2017). Heroes transform from egocentricity to sociocentricity; from dependence to autonomy; and from stagnation to growth. Parents transform from egocentric beings to sociocentric as

they must begin to also consider the needs of their child. If parents weren't completely autonomous before, they must become so as their new child is completely dependent on them. Parenthood could also fall under the rise-fall-rise heroic arc; parents start out strong in anticipation of having a child, but can descend after the child is born as the stress and responsibility takes its toll (Allison & Goethals, 2013; Allison & Smith, 2015). However, this stress ultimately makes the parents stronger at the end as they learn to address their child's needs.

Parents often fall into a mentorship role for their children. Allison and Smith (2018) even define "parent mentors" as one of their types of mentorship within their taxonomy of mentorship. Parents can lead their children into heroism by leading by example, such as in the case of military families or by giving their children unconditional support in more of a "classic mentor" role. Parents may inspire their children to greatness through their own misdeeds, acting as the anti-mentor that their child aspires to be nothing like. Darth Vader invites Luke to join him in his conquest of the galaxies, but Luke turns him down in favor of the light side. Parents might also encourage their child to follow them on a more villainous route, grooming them to become the next villain. Allison and Smith call this type of role model a "dark mentor".

People need heroes, good people who symbolize the desires and values of their group (Decter-Frain, Vanstone, & Frimer, 2017). If an individual or a group doesn't have a hero, they may begin to manufacture their own. Children, when in need of a hero, may find themselves identifying and emulating heroic traits in their own parents. Conversely, people also need villains to imagine themselves as heroes, so children may also have parents fill this role in their lives, especially in rebellious adolescence. Children may paint themselves as the underdogs, fighting against the rules that their parents impose. Underdogs are nearly universally appealing (Kim et al., 2008; Vandello, Goldschmeid, & Michniewicz, 2017), and this act of becoming an underdog may be a tactic that adolescents use in order to gain sympathy from their peers and others.

Kafashan, Sparks, Rotella and Barclay (2017) define four levels of helping that people expect from their heroes. The first three focus on close social and genetic bonds: help directed towards kin, help that is exchanged reciprocally between individuals or groups, and help towards those in whom one has a vested interest. We want to help those we are biologically close to, in a genetic and emotional sense. Therefore, parents are more likely to perform heroic actions

toward their children versus an unrelated stranger, or possibly even more so than toward a more distant relative. Collins (2009) defines five micro-causes of violence, the first of which is attacking the weak. Abusive parents may attack their own children both physically and mentally in part because their child is an easy, vulnerable target, who is in a naturally subservient relationship to them.

THE SPECTRUM OF GOOD AND BAD PARENTING

I believe that parenting heroes are made up of a mix of both objective and subjective heroes. I believe that the concept of heroic and villainous parents should be thought of as operating along a continuum of good and bad. At the extreme ends of the spectrum, there are those who are objectively heroic or villainous. Heroic parents are those who excel at what they do, who self-sacrifice for the sake of their own children and, in general, meet the criteria for objective heroism via their actions taken when acting as an effective and inspiring parent. A parent who sacrifices her own safety to rescue a stranger from a burning building would likely be objectively labeled as a hero, but she might not necessarily be a heroic parent. However, a parent who sacrifices her own safety in order to rescue her child from a burning building would likely be labeled a heroic parent. Villainous parents are those who harm, whether the harm is directed toward their own children or to others. Villainous parents include people with malicious and intentional behavior directed toward their own children, or who neglect their children.

Villainous parenting includes those who may believe that they are doing what is best, but who are in fact causing their children harm. In the middle of the continuum is where the subjectively determined heroes and villains among parents reside. To an outside observer, the parents in these categories might meet the criteria of both good or bad parents. Good parents tend to do right by their children, but don't necessarily make heroic sacrifices. A good parent will support her child, but won't necessarily self-sacrifice in the process. Bad parents may not treat their children in the best possible manner, but do not cause harm to their children or others. A child whose parents won't allow them to listen to rap music may see their parents as villains, but not listening to rap will not harm them, precluding this parent from the label of villain.

Doing harm is the central, defining characteristic for distinguishing villainous from bad parents, a criterion consistent with Jannof-Bulman and Bharadwaj's (2017) definition of the fundamental rule of group living as "doing no harm". As these authors state, "Ultimately, the ends do not justify the means when others are harmed... Suffering is increased with violent acts" (Jannof-Bulman & Bharadwaj, 2017). There are bad parents in the world who don't do the best for their children, but so long as they are not harming their children or others in the process, we would be hesitant to label them as villainous.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Doing harm to their own children or to others is the boundary that parents cross when in moving from "bad" to "villainous" status. There are good and bad parents, and these parents may be deemed heroic or villainous by their children on a subjective level. However, once a parent unequivocally harms her child or others as a result of parental actions, she becomes objectively villainous. If a parent self-sacrifices for the benefit of her child, she is an objectively heroic parent. Harming any innocent child is objectively one of the worst action that a human being could ever perform, and harming one's own child only magnifies the crime. Humans have a biological drive to promote and protect their own offspring. We want to do what is best for our children, to enable them to prosper in life. Parents may follow different parenting fads while attempting to help their children retain a competitive advantage over their peers. Some fads, however, may do more harm than good to a child. Ideally, good parents will do whatever works best for themselves and their children in order to help them succeed in life, and if they do so they may be designated heroes in the process.

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