

# A LINE ON LIFE

10/4/92

## Survivors \*

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Most children from dysfunctional families are dysfunctional. However, some do not develop the problems of their parents. How do they survive those terrible circumstances?

A study was done in Hawaii of almost 700 children born in 1955. All of the children had one or both parents who were either alcoholic or mentally ill. Over the years – even with these and other adversities – about one in ten developed exceptionally well.

**Substitute Parent.** With over thirty years of data from Hawaii, one of the most important factors seemed to be finding someone who could help them develop trust.

*"Without exception, all of the children who thrived had at least one person who provided them with consistent emotional support – a grandmother, an older sister, a teacher or neighbor. These are kids who are good at recruiting a substitute parent who is a good model for them."*

**Special Interests or Talents.** Beside their ability to draw people to them, the survivors in the Hawaii study had some talent or special interest that absorbed them. This activity also gave them a feeling of confidence.

*"They were able to use whatever skills they had well, even if they were not terribly bright. For some it was simply being good at swimming or dance, for others being able to raise prize-winning animals. But these activities offered them solace when things got tough."*

**Bouncing Back.** As young children, survivors demonstrated a dogged persistence in the face of adversity. This was seen even in simple tasks like building a tower with blocks.

*"A less resilient child will stop when the tower falls, or not try to build it very high. But the resilient child keeps going each time it falls."*

Another study found this resilience even at birth. Survivors were more alert and interested in their surroundings than others. By one year of age, they had a secure and warm relationship with their mothers. Even when the mother becomes abusive, this early closeness helps them to recover later in life.

Even though most of the toddlers were suffering from abuse and neglect by the age of two, they demonstrated enthusiasm, a high degree of independence, an easygoing compliance and a high tolerance for frustration. This continued, with survivors being more cheerful, flexible and persistent than other abused children at four years of age.

Essentially, they indicated a clear ability to seek help from other adults. Typically, abused children – who do *not* abuse their own children later – have a supportive relationship with the non-abusing parent.

In the 1950s, another study was started by the Menninger Foundation in Topeka. They explored how children handled stresses like divorce, moving or sickly parents as they grew up. The key trait among the survivors was an ability to *recover quickly from upsets*. Not only does being easygoing make them less likely to be upset, it also protects them from being the target of the abusive parent's anger. The children who rebel or complain are more likely to become the abusive parent's scapegoat than those who are more cheerful and malleable.

**Emotional Distance.** Creating an emotional distance from the abusive parent can reduce the effect of parental stresses. The emotional closeness to the abusive parent seems to increase distress in the child. The emotionally close child is more likely to be anxious, depressed, physically ill or self-derogatory than more distant siblings. In a study of "*super-adjusted*" children of psychotic parents, these children maintained an emotional distance from the parents. However, they found another adult – usually a teacher – who provided the emotional support they needed.

---

## **In any crisis, even the best survivor still pays a price.**

---

**Costs.** In a University of Rochester study of children of psychiatric patients, even survivors paid a price. As adolescents, one group who adjusted well seemed to cling to a moralistic outlook. In the words of psychiatrist Lyman Wynne–

*"From a distance these kids look good, but up close, in their intimate relations, you find that they are disagreeable and judgmental. They put down their siblings who are not doing as well, but they themselves are constricted and overcontrolled. Their normality is based on being uptight straight shooters."*

There is still another price. When the disturbed parent is of the other sex, this often causes an emotional distance in their intimate sexual relationships. Many of them break off relationships, when there is an hint of closeness. Others get involved in consuming projects that may require cooperation, but only at a comfortable emotional distance.

**Help.** Even though no child can come out of a dysfunctional family unscathed, each of us can help a child to become a survivor. If a child from a dysfunctional family asks for help, each of us can supply the needed emotional support. However, if we can't help the child ourselves, we can still refer the child to a professional who can help.

---

\* Adapted from Daniel Coleman's "Thriving Despite Hardship: Key Childhood Traits Identified," *The New York Times*, October 13, 1987.