

Reparenting Our Inner Child

Introduction

Many members of *Co-Dependents Anonymous*, grew up with caregivers who modeled unhealthy parenting. Some of us had permissive parents and caregivers who set no limits or boundaries while we were growing up. Some of us had authoritarian parents, and some of us had siblings or other caregivers who demanded obedience no matter what the situation. Denial, rage, guilt, shame, blame, and control are some common elements that may be found in the family dynamic. As a result, many of us developed:

- Irrational fears
- Insecurity
- Rebellious behavior
- Unhealthy attachments
- Self-defeating behaviors
- Difficulty with authority figures
- Low self-esteem
- Poor communication skills
- Difficulty setting and maintaining boundaries
- Guilt and shame

Reparenting is the practice of parenting the child within who did not get what they needed in childhood. Reparenting ourselves honors and nurtures our inner child. We learn to take responsibility for our own emotions and provide for our own needs.

What is the child within or inner child?

“The child-within is the sum of all of our childhood experiences, memories, perceptions, beliefs, and emotions. It is the part of us that

1) experienced both the positive and the negative aspects of childhood; 2) retains the unexpressed feelings generated by our childhood experiences; and 3) reacts strongly, either passively or rebelliously, to the difficult situations we encounter in our adult lives.”

- *Co-Dependents Anonymous*, Third Edition, page 107

“The child-within, or our inner-child, is that part of us that carries the innocence of life, curiosity of nature, and the spirit of who we are. Our inner-child can be delightful, spontaneous, creative, playful, joyful, mischievous, tender, and loving. It may also appear as the hurt, embittered, shamed, scared, or angry part of us.”

- *Co-Dependents Anonymous*, Third Edition, page 107

The following suggestions may help us discover our inner child:

- Reconnecting with our inner child through play, which can include: coloring, riding bikes, swimming, playing with toys, reading children’s books, jumping rope, puzzles, Lego
- Checking in with how we feel with a feelings wheel or chart
- Crafting: glitter, hook-rugs, sewing, wood-working, knitting
- Gardening
- Exploring Nature: hiking, biking, swimming, beach play, camping
- Writing with our non-dominant hand
- Music, dance, creative play
- Swinging on swings
- Blowing bubbles
- Looking at pictures of ourselves as children
- Cooking our favorite childhood meals
- Listening to music from our childhood
- Watching favorite movies or videos from our childhood

Finding our inner parent

Discovering the inner parent is a journey in itself. Our inner parent can represent the internalized messages and attitudes we received from our parents, siblings, caregivers, guardians, teachers, or any adult who was significantly involved in our lives as we grew up.

As we recover, we become aware of the dialogue between our inner parent and inner

child. It is important when doing this work that our inner parent voice comes from a place of love, acceptance, and tenderness.

Are there two kinds of inner parents?

It has been said that coming into CoDA, we come in at the emotional age when the codependent behavior started. For some of us, codependent behavior starts at an early age. When we begin to parent ourselves, we are able to free our biological parents or caretakers from guilt or blame for our current actions and behaviors.

In recovery, we take responsibility and start the process of reparenting ourselves, replacing the harmful inner voice with one that fosters safety, bonding, and wisdom. We become whole. Some members hear the positive messages from their Inner Parent and some hear conflicting messages.

The Loving Inner Parent Voice:

- Is an inner coach
- Shares positive affirmations (I am enough, I am loved, I am whole)
- Provides guidance
- Models good communication
- Remains calm (reminds me to breathe)
- Provides stability
- Makes good decisions
- Lovingly teaches basic life skills

The Critical Inner Parent Voice:

- Is judgemental
- Compares us to others
- Criticizes and lectures
- Echoes the voice of our caregivers
- Is predominantly dismissive
- Withholds respect
- Uses guilt, shame, and blame
- Has unrealistic expectations
- Is punishing and neglectful
- Is frightening
- “You made your bed, now lie in it”

What is reparenting?

Reparenting, also known as self-parenting, is learning how to be the healthy, nurturing, and loving parent that we did not have growing up. It means giving ourselves what our parents or other caregivers did not or could not give us when we were young. We accomplish this by using the tools of recovery. “The solution lies, not with trying to eradicate the child-within, but by embracing this often unpredictable, sometimes unwelcome part of ourselves.”

- *Co-Dependents Anonymous Third Edition*, page 108

We all have the ability to become a loving parent to our inner child. Here are some reparenting actions you can include in your daily life:

- Perform self-care gently: brush teeth gently, comb hair gently
- Secure comfortable and appropriate bedding
- Eat healthy, nutritious food
- Read books on parenting
- Monitor healthcare, and seek medical care when needed
- Attend CoDA meetings regularly
- Find a CoDA sponsor

What we say to ourselves

Part of this process is changing our thinking; what thoughts are we having about ourselves? One way to change our thinking is to ask ourselves these questions:

- Is this true?
- Is this helpful?
- Is this necessary?
- Is this kind?

We can use affirmations, gratitude lists, prayer, meditation, and journaling to help remove the shame-based thoughts and behaviors we learned in childhood. CoDA literature can help with healthy communication, setting boundaries, working the Steps, following the Traditions, and inner child work. Some recovering codependents

find parenting resources such as books, classes, or therapy helpful.

What is inner child work?

Inner child work is the conversation between the inner parent and the inner child. It is a way to gain insight and learn about each other's wants and needs.

Healthy Parenting Self-Talk

"Healthy parenting self-talk is filled with honesty, strength, understanding, compassion, and wisdom. ... We nurture ourselves with loving behaviors and thoughts."
- *Co-Dependents Anonymous Third Edition*, page 109

Gentle Parenting Reminders:

- When overwhelmed, it's ok to take a kindness break or "time out" for yourself
- If the critical parent shows up, invite the loving nurturing parent in
- Can I resolve any conflicts between my inner parent and inner child?
- Is there a living amend I can make with my inner child?
- Am I staying in balance with my Higher Power, my CoDA program, my family, work, and play?
- Ask myself questions like "How are you feeling? What would you like to do right now? Have I tried anything new lately?"

What is an inner conflict?

Inner conflict can occur when the parent and child have different needs and each insists on having their own way. We may identify an inner conflict when we feel:

- Immobilized
- Indecisive
- Emotionally frozen
- Unable to choose a defined path

We feel frustrated, resentful, and our codependent behaviors can manifest themselves in our relationships with ourselves and others.

How do we resolve an inner conflict?

First, we recognize that there *is* an inner conflict, and we accept this fact without judgment. Next, we let go of any expectations regarding the outcome. Then, we use our newly acquired reparenting skills to begin solving the inner conflict. The loving parent takes the time to listen deeply to what the child has to say without comment or criticism, much like we do in a CoDA meeting. The parent then asks the child to listen to them. If the child is unwilling or unable to listen, the parent may need to calmly set some clear communication boundaries. The goal is to reach safe and healthy solutions in order to live in the real world as a whole human being.

Conclusion

Working the program of *Co-Dependents Anonymous* helps us learn to build a healthy, loving relationship with ourselves, others, and our Higher Power. Many codependents find our inner child work creates balance and harmony, healing the inner child and making us whole. We continue on our journey of self-discovery – learning to love the self.

To learn more about inner child work, refer to the full-length CoDA publication:

Growing Up in CoDA

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