

The Broken Bowl Always Hungry / Never Full

The topic of self-esteem building for children is very complex and elusive. It can be challenging for parents and educators to identify the concept of self esteem and even more difficult to define it for children and youth. The metaphor of the, "broken bowl" can help us understand the concept of self-esteem and in particular the dynamics of children who bully and children who are bullied.

Imagine that every child comes into the world with a very unique and perfect "bowl". The purpose of this "bowl" is to collect and contain all the love and nurturing and respect that every child deserves so that they can grow up to know they belong to the human family and can contribute their gifts to the world. Now imagine that a child receives harsh words, neglect, abandonment, physical and/or sexual abuse...their bowl becomes cracked and broken. As the child with the broken bowl grows up, they will begin to feel "hungry" – a sense of emptiness deep inside. What they are starving for is a sense of belonging, a sense of their own basic worthiness. They begin to search for things to put in their bowl, and they may find genuine positive experiences and people who contribute to their bowl...but everything they receive just leaks out the cracks in the bottom. Even if they study hard and become a good student, or train hard and become a star athlete...the bowl constantly feels empty and the hunger is always there. Never enough, never enough. Even if a loving grandparent or a supportive teacher is kind and offers the child positive words and actions, it's very difficult for the child to "hold" anything for long.

This child will be likely to "bully" other children. We can imagine that a child who is bullying other children is simply trying to steal from other's bowls to fill their own. They become very good at sensing who will give it up easily and who won't. In that moment, when they have "taken" something from another person's bowl, they feel a sense of "full", a sense of satisfaction which often comes in a rush of power – and with that power-hit comes an easing of the anxiety that the emptiness creates. It's like a drug, it wears off quickly and the cravings become even stronger the next day. And so the cycle continues...

A child with a broken bowl can also become an easy target of violence and abuse from other children. Their sense of unworthiness can make them withdrawn and insecure or too eager to please and the signals they put out can draw a bully like a magnet.

Gender and Violence

Female violence has been on the rise and we are seeing more incidences of physical aggression in girls. The social aggression that girls are so adept at - verbal, body language and exclusion - is a potent and destructive form of violence that should not be trivialized in any way. It is also true that, although physical female violence gets a lot of press, the incidence and severity of this form of violence is far less common or serious than it is amongst males.

It is interesting to note that girls who are bullies in elementary school – the girls who seem to have all the power and control amongst their peers when they are 10 to 13 years old – are often the girls who end up in relationships with abusive males in high school and beyond. This is such a clear testament to the broken bowl syndrome. Clearly these girl bullies are not powerful and in control. They are simply, hungry and empty. Their low self-esteem will make them easy targets for abusive and controlling males.

When we look at the statistics on violence against women and children we know that the vast majority of violence is committed by males. In the face of this reality, how do we raise boy children who feel good about themselves? How do men who are aware of these facts come to terms with being male? It is important that we tell the truth about violence and part of this truth is that, *most men don't hurt women and children*. This is such an important reality check because the good men can know that they are in the majority. And women can know that if they are with an abusive boyfriend or husband, he represents the minority of men. In other words, there are lots of healthy fish in the sea and they have chosen (or been chosen by) a damaged and unhealthy one.

Imagine a "broken bowl" boy. A young man who has been taught - and has subscribed to the idea that he has to uphold the stereotype of "being a man". He has learned from movies, media, video games and probably his own father (even if his father has never abused him but is emotionally or physically absent) what it means to be a man. His male peers support this idea that "being a man" means being tough and strong and fearless at all times. He also has learned that a "real man" has money and status and dominates women. Overall "being a man" looks like, *being powerful* – which, to him means demonstrating *power-over* others. But, no matter what he has achieved or how he looks on the outside, he feels empty inside. The emptiness makes him feel anxious, inadequate, and powerless. This boy will likely try to feel "full" by taking power from others who are vulnerable in some way. For example, other smaller boys, girls and women, elders and the physically challenged are at very high risk of having their power stolen from them. The boy who is doing the stealing will feel full and satisfied, but not for long. Again, just like a drug addict, he will feel empty again soon and will crave the power "hit" he knows he can get by victimizing others.

Healing the Broken Bowl

Although we know that people who abuse others were likely victims of violence themselves, it is important to know that *many people who were abused as children don't grow up to pass the abuse on*. These people are the ones who get help. The help could come in the form of a supportive family member, partner or friend. It is likely that long-term professional help will be necessary if the past abuse is severe.

One of the ways that abuse is "passed on" is through self-abuse. When we don't value ourselves, we don't take care of ourselves. It is inevitable that, if we are abused as children, we will begin to abuse ourselves. Self-abuse can take many forms including disordered eating and cutting and inevitable these behaviours are fueled by the negative self-talk that we all engage in

to one degree or another. *Bullying ourselves* is one of the ways that we continue the abuse that we received early on. It is one of the ways we damage our own bowls. Shame and self-loathing are not agents of positive change. The more we reject the parts of ourselves that we judge as “negative”, the deeper we will be entrenched in self-hatred. We can only hope to change the cycle of destructive feelings and behaviours from a place of self-acceptance. When we shine the light of compassion inward, we can see the essence of who we are and not question our basic goodness. When we practice this persistently, self-love will come to us.

A powerful way to heal the cracks in a broken bowl is to learn how to self affirm. This is a process – and a practice - of giving less credence to external validation and learning how to internally validate. When we tune into our own voice of wisdom we will cultivate an inner presence that can guide us, coach us and, in a sense, re-parent us. This presence is our true self. The self that was beautiful and whole before we were ever damaged. This part of us can give us positive feedback and observe the negative thought patterns and reject or re-script them. Most importantly, this is the part of us that looks back at us in the mirror with absolute compassion.

An important aspect of healing through self-validation is creating an awareness of the distinction between external based praise and internal based praise...to really strengthen our broken bowls we need to build on the sense of who we are as opposed to what we look like or what we achieve. What we are cultivating isn't an “improved, new and better me”. We are simply tuning into something that is already there, our essence; the wise and loving beings that we all are.

Each time we are able to receive something positive and meaningful from ourselves, we are mending the cracks. This can be a long process and it takes lots of practice. Like going to the gym and working out, we need to develop the self-affirming and receiving "muscles". And simultaneously we need to withdraw from the dependence on external feedback. We can also practice receiving essence compliments from others with an inner voice that says, “That’s so true about me!” Being open to what others see and feel about us can also be important and we are not trying to be completely unaffected by the feedback we get from others. The key is to be able to make ourselves the final authority on how we perceive ourselves. Once we have a strong sense of self, we can sift through feedback from others with less reactivity. We can choose what we take in as true and reject anything that doesn't feel true. When we are challenged, criticized – we can practice having faith in our own truth. We can listen to what is being offered, breathe and feel our body, stay non-reactive and honestly assess our own intentions. However, we need not go so far as to take in to our core-self the judgments or opinions of others. As much as we can remain open to being wrong, and as willing as we can be to question our motives during a conflict...we must always, always be on our own side.

Eventually, with consistent practice, our bowl will be able to hold what we put into it and receive the treasures that others have to offer as well.

May all our bowls be whole and filled with love.