

**Rebuilding**

**When**

**A**

**Relationship**

**Ends**

**WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?**

**with Steven Warren**

The rebuilding model with important key elements to explore and expand upon. We begin at the base of the model put forward by Bruce Fisher and that of denial and fear. As we progress we reach the all important stage of 'Letting Go'. At this point the personal rebuilding elements relating to self worth, openness love trust and purpose enable us to be free. Freedom through exploration of who we really are enables us to be single or free to choose to enter into another relationship.

This additional work book has been created for those who have children and we focus on both their needs and your role as parent in enabling the rebuilding process to unfold in your children's life.

Before we begin one thought that occurs to me as we examine the impact and response of children is a question. ‘Were you a child whose parents separated?’ I was and now, nearing sixty years of age, a major part of my journey has been to release myself from the parentified child position. Let me outline what the parentified child means.

Children enter the world with countless needs. Until they are old enough to take care of themselves, children are supposed to be relatively free from the demands and concerns of the adult world. Ideally, a child’s parents place their children’s emotional, physical, and developmental needs before their own.

But when a parent has not been parented well themselves, the combination of unaddressed needs and parental power often lead to an unfortunate consequence for their own child — a type of role-reversal called *parentification*. Parentification is responsible for causing many mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and workaholism in the adults who experienced it as children.

There are two kinds of parentification:

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### **Emotional Parentification**

The child is expected to take care of and fulfil the emotional needs of the adult. Some examples of emotional parentification are: reassuring the parent that they will be all right when upset, shielding the parent from the emotional consequences of their actions and adjusting behaviour to suit the parent's emotional interests.

### **Instrumental Parentification**

The child is expected to take care of physical needs, such as housework, care of younger siblings and management of parental affairs.

The effects and consequences of parentification are profound. Parentified children must continually struggle to meet needs they are not able to fulfil, and consequently, they develop deep-seated feelings of inadequacy. The pressure of having to constantly meet unrealistic demands instils a sense of hopelessness in the child that they will ever be able to handle the challenges life presents to them.

Adults parentified as children experience the following things:

- Fear that they cannot adequately meet their own expectations and demands
- Poor self-esteem
- A feeling of disconnection from their real self
- Feelings of incompetence
- Underestimation of their own intelligence
- Overestimation of the importance of others
- Shame, guilt, anxiety and depression
- Feeling like they're still children, who can't cope with being adults
- Taking on the role of caretaker
- Work addiction
- Co-dependency/Acceptance of too much responsibility

## MODULE ONE - RECOVERY

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### **DENIAL This Could Never Happen to Me!**

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There are three areas relating to children of separated parents that cause problems for children. Number one is that children will continue to maintain some sort of

fantasy images of their parents getting back together again, with much emotional investment in that dream.

They have difficulty accepting the reality that their parent's relationship is over and it may be a surprise to learn how strong this fantasy is with your children. You continually need to present them with the reality that the relationship is over so they do not continue to invest in the fantasy. Children may use all kinds of manipulative behaviour to try and get the two of you back together again, trying to have you spend time together, or trying to get you talking to each other. Be aware of the large emotional investment your children have in NOT accepting the ending of your relationship and in hoping that their parents will get back together again. Respond firmly but gently and persistently with your own decision – that the relationship is over.

Another second aspect with children in self-acceptance is their belief that they did something wrong to cause your relationship break up. The last time that they disobeyed – when they did not go to bed or clear up their food at mealtime or do their household tasks – they think that this led to their parents fighting and relationship ending. Try hard to help your children see that it is not their fault and that the relationship breakdown is a grown up problem.

A third aspect has to do with the fear that now they have lost one parent, will they lose the other parent? They tend to be very clinging and dependent upon the parents, and they need a lot of reassurance that you will not leave them. Parents do leave each other but they do not leave their children.

## STAGE TWO

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### **LONELINESS to ALONENESS**

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As we explore in our one to one sessions it is natural to feel extreme loneliness when your relationship ends but healing can come from the pain, if you listen to it. You can learn how to grow through loneliness to the stage of aloneness - where you feel comfortable being by yourself.

Children suffer loneliness too after their parents separate. They have the same kind of empty feelings inside them that their parents are feeling. They have the same need to be with others to fill up that loneliness, but they also fear being close to others.

Children may feel that they are the only child in the school whose parents have separated. The parents of other children may also judge your child by what you have done.

Daily living habits are altered just as those of the parents are. Instead of coming home and having two parents to spend time with them, to play, to put them to bed, there is only one parent and the children feel the loneliness of the new house when one or both parents move. At the home of the noncustodial parent there may not be familiar toys or books to play with. Often the other parent's home is not set up for children and may be located in a new neighbourhood away from familiar friends and faces.

The children need to work through their loneliness just as the parents have to in order to develop their own healthy feelings of aloneness. Children need to learn that they have the resources within themselves to spend time alone without having to have another person around.

Many children may have been lonely before the ending of their parent's relationship because the interaction within the family did not help them to feel that they belonged.

When the relationship ends it tends to increase this feeling of not belonging or not being okay. However, perhaps the crisis itself can be used to help to deal directly with such a problem and it is a special time for parents to help the children feel that they belong, that they are loved, and that they are an important part of this

new family whether it be a single parent family or a two parent family with the parents living apart.

However, as with all of the rebuilding stages, when the parents are dealing with their own loneliness, it is very difficult for them to have enough emotional time and energy left to devote to their children's needs. It may be necessary, as I mentioned in our work together, for parents to work through their own rebuilding stages first and then they will be better able to help their children.

### **STAGE THREE**

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## **GUILT versus REJECTION**

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As we have explored in our one to one sessions in the ending of your relationship dumpers end the relationship while dumpees have it ended for them. The adjustment process differs since dumpers feel more guilt and dumpees feel more rejection. Dumpers start their adjustment whilst still in the relationship, but dumpees start adjusting later. For the mutuals, people who decide jointly to end the relationship, the adjustment process is somewhat easier.

Often the children are very angry at the parent who decided to leave and they have a great deal of difficulty maintaining a relationship with that person. They blame the break up on the dumper, so they take out their pain

and frustration on that person because they probably fail to see that there is not that much difference between the dumper and the dumpee since both of them contributed to the ending of the relationship but in different ways.

Almost always the children could be looked upon as dumpees in that they had little to do with the decision and therefore feel the same frustration and anger that dumpees do. Children however are not like dumpees in the sense that they often recognise that the relationship is ending before the parents do.

Children have a definite problem with rejection and guilt in that they may feel responsible for their parent's relationship not working out and so they are going to need help in seeing that it is not their fault and it is an issue between the two adults.

Children need to realise that they are not guilty for their parent's separation and they are not being rejected as well. If the parents can maintain a quality relationship with the children after their separation the children will be able to deal with these feelings themselves.

## STAGE FOUR

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### **GRIEF BOYS and GIRLS DO CRY**

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Children must grieve an important loss, although sometimes it is difficult for parents to let them do the grieving they need to do. We see them start to cry because they miss their noncustodial parent and we want to take away that pain and reassure them, 'Now don't cry, its okay. They will be back and you will get to see them in the future.' However reassurance isn't necessarily what children need because what they need is some sort of acceptance: 'You are feeling very sad your father is missing, You feel very sad living away from your father who you love so much,'

It is easy for us to get our own emotions and guilt involved instead of allowing the child to express his or her feelings and emotions. Children tend to cry and grieve more naturally than adults until we take away the permission for them to do this and start interfering in the process because we are fearful that if they cry then so will we.

The same may be true with the anger part of grief. The child may be very angry about being separated from a parent and having to go through the associated life style changes. When children start expressing their anger adults often try to take that anger away by saying, 'well

you just need to grow up and understand and someday you'll see that what we did was normal, natural and healthy.; Allow the children to just be angry and so a good response to enable this is to say 'You feel very angry toward your father for no longer being here with us.'

Children will go through the five stages of grief we have been working through in our sessions. They will start out by denying that their parents are separated and believing the parents will get back together again. As they proceed through the stages of anger, bargaining and so on children need to be allowed to work through all five stages of grief. The exercises we talked through as well as the checklist I provided before our session on grieving may also be helpful for older children to explore.

Obviously there is a difference in the children's loss because parents do not separate from the children and the relationship between parent and child will persist even though, as in many cases, the child does not see the noncustodial parent in the early stages of the relationship ending.

As with all other feelings, a parent who shows the child how to grieve is far more influential than the parent who tells children about grieving. Children will emulate a

grieving parent, and will gain much more from experiencing that healthy and much needed release.

## STAGE FIVE

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### **ANGER How Could You Do This To ME?**

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I remember the daughter of one parent who had ended their relationship become uncontrollably angry at her father in the swimming pool one day. The anger was far stronger than the situation warranted and was apparently a direct result of a feeling of abandonment for which she blamed her father.

It is very easy for separated parents not to allow their children to be angry. The custodian of the child will many times try to establish a good relationship between their children and their former partner even though the partner has not kept appointments and appears to be involved in something other than the children. They may try to help the children accept the situation without being angry but it is appropriate for children to be angry at the parent who has let them down.

It is also easy for us to withdraw love when our children express anger because we may be so emotionally upset ourselves that when children get angry we immediately become unaccepting by saying ‘Go to your room until

you can learn to behave properly!’ where we really need to invest that extra energy to listen and to accept our children’s anger. But we also need to see that they express their anger appropriately and do not become aggressive, have temper tantrums or break things.

Allow children to express their anger in the same positive, constructive ways we have been exploring in our sessions. When they say that they are very angry at their parent for not coming to see them just accept this and say ‘I think it’s right for you to feel angry in the situation.’

Many people learn their emotional blocks for expressing anger through some interaction with their parents. Many being punished for being angry or not allowed to even be angry or were sent to their rooms or had feelings of rejection and loss of love. It is far better for children to learn that anger is a part of being human and that it is okay to express anger in a positive way.

## STAGE SIX

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### **LETTING GO and Moving On**

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Children have to deal with letting go of the old concept of the two parent family. Suddenly it is a one parent family with a custodial and noncustodial parent. Even if there is joint custody, the children have to deal with different lifestyles and it is hoped that children will not have to let go of a quality relationship with both parents.

The child may have difficulty, however, in dealing with the parents ability to let go or not to let go and this may become an important rebuilding block for children if they continually hear from one parent about all the good or bad things the other parent is doing. If the parents have not let go of the relationship the children tend to get caught in either the positive or the negative feelings between the parent and this will prolong the adjustment process for the children.

## MODULE TWO - ADJUSTMENT

### **SELF-CONCEPT From Feeling Bad to Knowing I am Worthy**

The ending of their parent's relationship can be very damaging to children's self-concept. Suddenly life has been uprooted and they can feel rejected, lonely, alienated and perhaps guilty by questioning what they did wrong to contribute to their parents separation.

Here the children's adjustment process may be complicated if they are also going through certain growth stages which are, of themselves, threatening to self-concept. As a prime example there is evidence from developmental psychology that the teenage years are the most difficult years in growth and development. Puberty means dramatic changes in the body; height; weight; sexual characteristics; body hair and voice. Suddenly identity or who they thought they were is also changing.

They are experiencing new attitudes and feelings such as sexual attraction and relationships with peers have become much more important than their parental relationships. This rapid period of change is a real strain on a teenager's self-concept. So if youngsters are going through extreme changes in themselves at the time of their parent's separation the children's self-concepts are more likely to be affected.

Going through exercises we went through in our sessions related to this part of the rebuilding process may be useful to share with your children. In fact doing the exercises together is a good way of increasing family communication.

## **STAGE EIGHT**

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### **FRIENDSHIPS: Where Has Everybody Gone?**

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Children may have a problem with friendships often feeling isolated and ‘different’ as if they were the only children to have parents who are separated. They may not know anybody else whose parents are separated partly because children do not often talk about their parent’s separation as it is still a stigma in many communities.

Just as the parents tend to become friends with only others who have separated then so do children begin to seek out friends with families with single parents. And again children may withdraw just as parents withdraw and shut out all friendships. Children who are going through the pain of their parents separating really need friends to talk to but they find it difficult to seek them out or to discuss personal concerns.

Parents can help their children to find somebody to talk to and maybe it is the time for the relatives to get involved (however relatives who are highly emotional

and who may have unresolved concerns themselves are not good people for the children to talk to).

We need to be ware and supportive of the needs of children as they are going through this process. We can encourage them to become involved in after school activities and community programmes and having friends to talk with who accept and understand has been shown to shorten the adjustment period.

## STAGE NINE

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### **LEFTOVERS HAVE TO BE CLEARED**

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Children will have some difficulty with the leftovers in similar way to their parents. The child's style of interaction with others is based on only a few years of life experience and a limited repertoire of behaviours. A strong influence right now is the feeling of internal pain. So until the child changes he or she will continue to interact with adults as before. If a new stepparent comes into the picture, for example, the child will tend to have the same problems with that stepparent as he/she had with his/her natural parent. This will not change until the child works through those old emotions and learns new ways of relating to adults.

## STAGE TEN

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### **LOVE.....**

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While everyone is concerned about what love is children may feel somewhat unlovable because one parent has left. Many suffer from the fear of losing the other parent as well. At the very time when children need a great deal of parental love, parents are undergoing their own trauma and often are incapable of giving as much love to their children as they would like.

Awareness of this problem and special efforts to overcome it is the key – especially through as much honest conversation with youngsters about what it going on, and reassurance that they are much loved by both parents are much needed at this crucial time.

## MODULE THREE – THE FUTURE

### STAGE ELEVEN

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#### **TRUST: The Foundation of Healthy Relationships**

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The problem of trust is especially difficult for those children who did not know what was going on with their parents' divorce, so the children are now adjusting to a parent's absence with little or no direct communicating with the parent who has left the family home. If the father, for example, suddenly leaves the family, and does not communicate why he is leaving or the problems that the parents are having the child may feel deserted and have trouble trusting that absent noncustodial parent.

Children really are tougher than we think and can handle an awful lot of direct communication and reality if parents just take the time to communicate with them. Parents who hide their heads and feel that they cannot share the reality of their situation with their children often create a great deal of mistrust in the children and lose a potentially valuable source of love and support for themselves! It is a very unusual for an older child who does not know the parents are going to end their relationship before the parents tell them. The more you can communicate and be honest with your children, the more they will trust what you have to say both now and in the future.

## STAGE TWELVE

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### SEXUALITY

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When their parent's relationship ends where do children find role models for relationships and becoming an adult? It is often confusing for children to see their parents get involved in another relationship. Somehow children sense that it may include sex and if the parents are in the high sex drive phase and sending out all of the sexual vibrations which accompany that stage what do the children do with that? How do they handle this new behaviour in their parents?

Communication may sound like an old answer, but it is critically important at this point. When parents talk with their children frankly and openly about sexuality it is very helpful for the children and the parents. Although there is much anxiety and insecurity in the children's lives that very turmoil can be the beginning of learning. Children may well gain a far deeper understanding of sexuality, including their own as their parents go through this stage of rebuilding

Children can find role models in relatives, grandparents and their parent's friends and as one teenager stated 'It seems I've got more models around now that I have had before!'

## STAGE THIRTEEN

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### **RESPONSIBILITY - Relating as Adult to Adult**

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In our work we have discussed over and under responsible behaviour and how it was learned in childhood. What kind of behaviour are you teaching your children? If you are children have not had first-hand exposure to adult relationships in the family interaction as they grow up it will be difficult for them to do it in their own future relationship. One of the greatest things we can do for our children is to develop an increasingly adult relationship with them as they grow through life.

## STAGE FOURTEEN

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### **SINGLENESS: It's OK**

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Singleness is an important rebuilding block for children too. They need to learn to be single, individual, and independent from parent's before they enter a committed relationship with another person. For children who can see and understand the importance of singleness, it will give them a much better chance to develop successful relationships in their future.

## STAGE FIFTEEN

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### **FREEDOM And the New Relationship With ME**

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Children need to work their way through the rebuilding stages, and to learn the freedom to be themselves, free from all the unhealthy needs that control so many people. They need to be free to choose a committed relationship and quite frequently children whose parents parted say that they will not get involved with a future partner because they saw how devastating the ending of their parent's relationship was for them. Children need freedom of choice in what they will do with their lives rather than to follow their parent's pattern.

All children are not the same nor do they have the same needs. The rebuilding stages are general outlines and so remember that each human being is unique and that it is as important for them as it is for adults that they are respected and treated as such. Their differing needs depend on age, sex, cultural background, number of children in the family, health, availability of extended family and friends and neighbours, physical environment, conditions at school and the nature of their parents breakup as well as the individual personal characteristic of each child.

Children are much stronger than most adults believe and can grow through the rebuilding process along with you.