

Living in the Real World

by Jim Greenman

“A Question of Perspective: Situationally Disadvantaged”

Coping with day-to-day life is often a matter of developing a sense of perspective. Working with children and families is stressful, **being** a child and a member of a family is stressful. It is easy to get swept away and lose our balance as we struggle with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, especially the outrageous fortune seemingly brought on by the people around us.

In my last column, the concept of *positive labeling* was discussed as a coping strategy for use with children we were struggling with. Recognizing that we tend to label people negatively based on behavior that we don't like — “he's ornery,” “she's a whiner,” “he's destructive” — it was suggested that, by focusing on the positive aspects of the root behavior and giving the child a positive label, we can change our perspective. The fearful child becomes *careful* and the four year old Ninja Turtle becomes *high spirited*. This column addresses another concept that might alter our perspective and help us see others in a more positive light, helping us to think through difficult situations.

Situationally Disadvantaged

I sat around the breakfast table of this sturdy farm family where I would spend the next few days. We talked of fences to be mended, calves to birth, carburetors to rebuild. I, the urban consultant, post-modern man, was polite and charming and absolutely useless. What I knew and knew how to do was of little value here. My daily rhythms had no correspondence with this sun-up to sundown physical life. My cheery cynical wit brought on no smiles. I generally felt incompetent, bored amidst the hard work others were doing, and increasingly reclusive. Inwardly I was getting a little surly, my smile growing a little frozen. This was not a situation I was quick to treasure. Over time, I became

more comfortable as I adapted to the situation. But the me they saw was not the me I felt the best about.

Many children in child care are **situationally disadvantaged** in analogous situations. Just like me on the farm, the situation they find themselves in puts a heavy burden on them to use all their personal resources to adapt. They are **situationally challenged** — their energy, patience, flexibility, and reservoirs of good will are put to the test. Certainly new situations that require stretching may be necessary, and actually *good for us*, in that they broaden our experience. Growing is learning how to handle an increasingly widening world. But the immediate result is that we are not at our best.

Mama, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Toddlers

Thirteen toddlers sit at tables smearing paste on paper bunnies, cotton puff tails ready to be attached. Two children are happily sucking on the paste brush, another is beginning to resemble Colonel Sanders as cotton clings to her chin. The harried teachers are not amused.

Nineteen month old Jordan arrives home from child care at 5:30. He's whiny, negative, and tired. He fusses, eats, fusses, and crashes by 7:00. His disappointed parents hope they might have the delightful toddler they know and love back with them on the weekend.

Toddlers are clearly the most situationally challenged in child care. Unfortunately able to periodically pass as younger, ersatz preschoolers, they are often treated as such. Made to fit into structured schedules and activities and expected to conform to group life, they use up much of their daily quota of energy. Often, as in Jordan's case, they have little in their reservoir of good will left for the people whom they must spend the rest of their lives with — their

parents. While it is developmentally appropriate for toddlers to be anarchists with a blind herd instinct, alternately contrary and eager to please; also relentlessly mobile, quick to climb, dump, and explore the world in an often clumsy fashion; in most child care programs, it is **situationally inappropriate**.

How Much of This Do I Have to Take, Oh Lord?

Eight year old Jacob is bored, tired of the program he has spent most of his life in, tired of the block corner, tired of clean-up time, tired of jig saw puzzles, tired of games. If he were home, he could work on his models, meet with his secret club, or make some money raking his neighbor's lawn.

School age children are the other group in child care subject to benign neglect. The opposite of toddlers, they are often treated as if they were old preschoolers, with little allowance for their interests in a complex social life of teams, clubs, and cliques — or projects that span days and weeks. Escaping from the classroom or bus, and thrust into a limited or structured situation, some school age children will present less than their best side.

Hey, What About Me?

It's 1:40 pm and, as usual, Allison can't sleep. What to do — considering she can't get up until 2:30; and in the last hour she has already explored her cot, her clothes, and each nook and cranny of her four year old body? What about trying to sneak over and wake up James?

Group settings inevitably force individuals to accommodate to the group. The less flexibility in space, time, and expectations, the more accommodation required. It may be necessary, but nevertheless unreasonable. If the situation cannot be changed, at the least we should recognize the child's difficulties in coping as legitimate.

Doing the Best You Can

Adults are situationally disadvantaged in child care as well: toddler teachers trying to provide a developmentally appropriate program at 1 to 7 ratios, or the teachers coping with non-nappers with neither the space nor staff for awake children. It is also hard to maintain a thoughtful perspective on daily life without time off the floor and time to talk to co-workers.

Parents — the other adults in child care — who take their responsibility for their child's care seriously and assertively seek personalized care from a program unable to provide it are equally disadvantaged. In that situation, they are often viewed not as conscientious but as demanding. While outside of our relationship with parents we might imagine the ideal parent as one fiercely protective and conscientious about his or her child, in our settings the ideal parent in our minds is too often one who is willing to back down quickly when we counter with our assertion of our needs.

Judge Not, Lest Ye . . .

Situationally disadvantaged is a particularly useful term for teachers and other professionals because it is a constant reminder of the influence of the situation on behavior. To look at an adult or child as situationally disadvantaged **does not** remove responsibility for one's actions or excuse behavior; but it puts it in perspective as we struggle with the consequences. At the least, it may help us be less judgmental about the behavior that confronts us. Hopefully, it also focuses attention on what we may be able to change in order to remove the often developmentally inappropriate pressure on the child.

It is interesting to note that in child care and education we usually implicitly recognize situational effects even while we are locating causality elsewhere. For instance, when a child is biting, our discussion often puts the weight of the problem on the child or that too frequently used, convenient, root of all evil — *problems at home*. Yet when we actually try to attack the problem, we don't change the child as much as tinker with the situation, addressing the experience of the child in the environment, relaxing the schedule, improving a crowded situation, or reducing stimulation.

The more perspective we have, the less likely we are to lapse into the debilitating and self-defeating, self-righteousness that too often leads to power struggles with the children and parents we are committed to serving.

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