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This is Gonna Hurt Me More than it's Gonna Hurt You!

Parents are autocrats, not to be questioned by their children! At least, that's the way it was, growing up in my family. "Children are to be seen and not heard," my siblings and I were advised. This is all very unfortunate, as I have learned the hard way. Families that lack both well-developed communication skills as well as an awareness of the need for those skills ultimately experience a myriad of problems, and can cost society both materially and in terms of the dialectic process of institutionalization. I can attest to that contention from my experience with four of my own families.

First, there is the family that I grew up in. Sadly, my father passed away when he was just shy of his fiftieth birthday, and I was just shy of my twelfth. That left me, my mom (she passed away in 2000), who was thirty-eight at the time (1973), and my sister, thirteen months my junior. My older (by nine years) half sister (same mom) had already married. As indicated earlier, my birth family maintained and enforced very restrictive rules; the family was dysfunctional as a result. Although I now understand that Mom's strict parenting style was believed to be ideal by many in that day, rarely did I feel comfortable expressing my feelings

and needs then. Mom used intimidation tactics, such as threatening to whip me with a belt if I did not bring home grades meeting her expectations. She was physically abusive, too, having no qualms about carrying out the whipping. My sister and I wouldn't dare tell anyone about this. It was a position-oriented family, and Mom was the queen, not to be questioned. "The majority is not always right" is the maxim that was drilled into us, as well as, "Don't you worry about what the Jones' are doing; we're not them." These were particularly damaging to me because I took them literally and justified deviant behavior with them.

To my dismay, until recently I was oblivious to the fact that my family was dysfunctional. Don't get me wrong - there were many clues, but I did not have the wisdom to perceive or interpret them. As a result, I created two dysfunctional families of my own.

My first marriage lasted only three years. I divorced Maria in 1987 when our son Joshua was only eighteen months old. She took him to the Philippines with her, and I have not seen him since then. Joshua turned 28 this year. I viewed myself as the ruler of that family. I divorced Maria because she did not bow down to my authority.

My second spouse, Sheila, was also a wonderful person. However, we could not communicate. I did not recognize that my communication skills were lacking. I ~~contributed~~^{attributed} the lack of communication all to Sheila. I was abusive to both our daughter and her mother, to the point where I am almost ten years into an eighteen-year prison sentence imposed as a direct result of the abuse of my daughter. Rather than listening to her attempts to convey her feelings to me, my attitude was that "I am older and wiser and in charge and even if you don't like it, I know what's best and you need to trust me and believe that I would never do anything to

hurt you and so I need to hear nothing from you."

Now taxpayers are spending tens of thousands of dollars keeping me housed, clothed, fed, and healthy both physically and mentally.

Taxpayers may also be incurring expense to assist my victim with her mental health.

If not, the vicious cycle may continue, widening the circle of influence, very possibly impacting our social institutions negatively.

Let us get back to that prison sentence I am serving. I live in a dorm - we call it a "pod" - with six other guys.

If we don't see ourselves as a family, life in here can become extremely unpleasant. One

might retort that life in prison is not meant to be pleasant and therefore is already unpleasant. This is true. Nonetheless, if I and my podmates do not recognize that we are a family, — "An organized, relational transaction group, usually occupying a common living space over an extended time period, and possessing a confluence of interpersonal images that evolve through the exchange of meaning over time" (Pearson, Judy. "Communication in the Family," 2nd ed., New York: HarperCollins, 1993, p. 14.) — then our relationships with one another are far less important and become dyadic, triadic, and tetradic. Without each podmember having a mindset of a family member, roles, rules, responsibilities, and future prospects as a group

become diverse and distorted. We experience communication confusion. When the podmembers perceive the group as a family, and to their utmost to maintain productive family communication patterns and people-oriented roles, we all grow and experience something more of us hitherto realized is possible - a functioning family network. Prison under these circumstances can actually be very pleasant. Otherwise, misery ensues; we are at each others throats, sometimes literally.

Because every member of a family, - whether it be the one we were raised in, one we ourselves begin with a significant other, or one formed in a less common way -

affects, and is affected by, every other member, their communication skills need to be honed so that they are able to effectively make known to other members their frustrations and, at the same time, show that they understand those frustrations and are willing to work to resolve them.

Effective communication enables family members to better cope with the constant changes and stressors that we all experience; without it, there's no telling who will be hurt most. Best assured, though, there will be hurt enough for everyone, and the costs will extend to the society in which that family exists. Interpersonal contacts, then,

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play a crucial part in family stability, and
thereby in the social construction of our reality,
as well.