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Aging Well

The Link Between Childhood and Old Age

By: James L. Holly, MD

This is the third in a series of four articles based on Dr. George Vaillant's book, *Aging Well*. In the previous two articles, we examined the conclusions of the Harvard longitudinal study on aging. We looked at the characteristics which did not contribute to aging well and those which do. Surprisingly, we learned that the things which we commonly associate with "living long," i.e., low cholesterol and long-lived parents, do not translate into "aging well." We then reviewed the six life tasks which everyone must address if they are going to "age well."

Now, we want to understand how childhood impacts learning and living in order to "age well." Dr. Vaillant states: "Childhood colors our old age in two ways:

1. There are complex ways...which...allow the child to develop trust, autonomy and initiative. This chain of events allows a child's hope, the child's sense of self, and the child's self-efficacy to forge the relationships and social supports leading to self-care and an enriched old age.
2. There are deep childhood attachments that through chance and tragedy are lost from view, but which, many decades later, memory may bring to light again. Recovery of and gratitude for these lost loves can be enormously healing."

Perhaps the most helpful application of these concepts is that even tragic loss of a parent, or loved-one as a child does not necessarily predict an unsuccessful life. Memories of and gratitude for the life and contribution of the one lost can enrich and empower our lives, even in the face of great loss or tragedy.

Nature of Childhood

In the Harvard study, participants were categorized as to the nature of their childhood. “Five separate facets of childhood were rated in the following terms:

1. Warmth and stability of home environment.
2. How warm and encouraging (i.e., conducive to basic trust) and how conducive to autonomy, initiative and to self-esteem was the boy’s relationship with his mother?
3. With his father?
4. Did he have siblings? If so, did he enjoy supportive relationships with them?
5. Would the one doing the rating have wished to grow up in that home environment?”

The results were scaled and the participants were categorized as “cherished,” or “loveless.” Childhoods in the top quartile were called “warm,” and its members, “the Cherished.” Childhoods in the bottom quartile were called “bleak,” and its members, “the Loveless.”

Long, Happy Marriages

In the midst of this discussion, Dr. Vaillant comments, “Long, happy marriages have a lot in common with successful aging. They are hard work. Both require a healthy dose of tolerance, commitment, maturity, and a sense of humor.” While the Harvard study did not address this issue, the following may be inferred from the study. In that many of the pressures which cause marriages to fail are rooted in childhood experiences, and in that the effects of those childhood experiences disappear with age, there is good reason to expend the hard work and effort necessary to make marriage successful. And, in that a person takes the same set of difficulties, i.e., themselves, to a future relationship, it makes sense to work on the problems in the current relationship rather than hoping for some magical resolution of one’s problems in a future marriage, or courtship.

Links between childhood and old age

Dr. Vaillant continues, “Although we all ‘know’ that childhood affects the well-being of adults, recent scientific reviews reveal that such explanations are rather less important than we thought.

1. When identified in advance, rather than in retrospect, fingernail biting, early toilet training, even that old standby the cold, rejecting mother, failed to predict either emotional illness or bad aging.

2. Orphans, by the time they were 80, were all as likely to be happy and in the pink of health as those whose parents lovingly watched them graduate from high school.

Emotional riches seem far more important in successful aging than income.”

Level of Income

Because long life has long been thought to be associated with income level, Dr. Vaillant examined factors which predicted high income; they were:

- “Good mental health
- Good coping both as children and adults
- Warm friendship,
- Admired fathers
- Loving mothers”

However, the following did not predict future income:

- “Dysfunctional families
- Fathers on welfare”

Dr. Vaillant’s conclusion is that, “What goes right in childhood predicts the future far better than what goes wrong.” The resilience of the human spirit is illustrated here: good childhood experiences often result in good adult experiences, but bad childhood experiences do not necessarily dictate that a person will not be a successful person.

Unhappy childhoods become less important with time

Childhood influence on adjustment to college “was very important between those with ‘bleak’ childhoods – ‘the Loveless’ -- in contrast with men whose childhoods were the most sunny – ‘the Cherished’.” And, “by early midlife, childhood was still significantly important, but by old age the warmth of childhood was statistically unimportant.” “A warm childhood tended to inoculate men against future pain, but a bleak childhood did not condemn men to misery. Childhood environment genuinely affect the men’s health, but this did not persist. By age 75, there was little relationship between the quality of childhood and objective physical health.”

Nevertheless, there are important lessons to learn in childhood

Childhood does affect one’s life, however. In his poem, Victory, Joseph Conrad, warned, “Woe to the man whose heart has not learned; While young to hope, to love, to put its trust in life.” Dr. Vaillant pointed out “four findings (which) confirm Conrad’s bitter prophecy;” they are:

1. The Loveless were more likely to be labeled mentally ill.
2. The Loveless found it difficult to play.

3. The Loveless neither trusted their emotions nor the universe.
4. The Loveless were relatively friendless for all of their lives.

This is the balance to the optimism above. Childhood does not condemn a person to an isolated life, but it can result in such.

Eight Questions

At age 50, there were eight true/false questions that were highly correlated with both past and future. These questions linked childhood with old age. A “true” answer to all eight reflected discomfort with emotions and were indicative of loveless pasts and the unhappy futures that led to feeling physically and mentally “sick” in old age.

“True answer to the following four questions suggested that the men at age 50 might be too defended against their emotions:

1. Others have felt that I have been afraid of sex.
2. Marriage without sex would suit me.
3. I have had a difficult sexual adjustment.
4. Sometimes I feel numb when I should be feeling a strong emotion.

“True answers to the other four questions suggested that the men might experience their own needs and emotions as too overwhelming:

1. I have sometimes thought that the depth of my feelings might become destructive
2. I sometimes fear that I will wear people out.
3. People usually let me down.
4. Sometimes I feel like I am a considerable strain on people.”

The “Loveless” in childhood were three times as likely to answer “true” to these eight questions as were men deemed to be “Cherished.”

Permission to experience emotions

The lessons of childhood – trust, autonomy, initiative – are learned, and it is possible to consciously allow relationships to foster the successful accomplishment of these necessary life tasks. But, “How does a family give a child permission to experience emotions? How does a child learn to trust the security of relationships in order to be honest with his/her feelings? How does a child learn to express his/her emotions rather than the emotions which he/she thinks the parents want them to have? This is the issue in

developing autonomy. And, how does a child learn to take personal responsibility for dealing with his/her feelings constructively? This is the issue in developing initiative in relationship to feelings.

These life tasks are learned emotionally through how a child deals with anger. Dr. Vaillant points this out the effects of failing to deal with anger:

1. “The mastery of aggression is as delicate an ego-balancing act as is the mastery of sexual intimacy.
2. Men who failed to achieve Career Consolidation at 50 and those who comprise the Sad-Sick at 70 were three to four times more likely to have reported that they handled anger either through explosive outbursts, or by burying it deep within themselves.
3. Harvard men who never achieved successful or gratifying careers also revealed a lifelong inability to deal with anger.

It makes all the difference in the world if when you are young your parents tolerate and ‘hold’ your sadness, your love – and your anger – or if instead they treat your emotions as misbehavior.”

Applications

It is possible that the most important applications of these observations is how we deal with our children and grandchildren; how we help them process the important tasks of childhood such as learning trust, developing autonomy and practicing initiative. Making certain that our children and grandchildren grow up in a “warm” environment as “the cherished” rather than in an emotionally “bleak” home as the “loveless,” may be the greatest inheritance we can give them. And, it is refreshing to discover that our ability to “give” them these critical elements of success has nothing to do with our income, station in life, or education.

Yet, there are benefits of these insights to those who are entering, or experience early, mid, or advanced old age. The good news is that no one has to be a life-long victim of their childhood. There is further good news to know that the impact of negative childhood experiences inextricably decreases as we age.

Aging well is the “icing on the cake” of life; it is the consummation of a life well spent. The roots of aging well begin in childhood, but even in the absence of a “good” childhood, it is possible to be a successful adult. And, aging well is worth the effort for ourselves, for those we love and for those for whose futures we bear some responsibility.

Remember, it is important because it is your life and your health, and it is their life and their health as well.