

# **Chapter 8**

## **The Solution:**

### **Becoming Your Own Loving Parent**

While becoming your own Loving Parent is at the core of healing from a neglectful childhood, it is also the gateway to the child within. In addition to the ACA Twelve Steps, this is The ACA Solution. By reparenting ourselves with gentleness, humor, love, and respect, we find our child within and true connection to a Higher Power. This is the God who does not abandon.

Through The Solution, we understand that we can release our biological parents. We can continue to separate from our family in body and mind. This is an important step for us as we develop our own identity that is different than our dysfunctional family role. The roles are family hero, scapegoat, lost child, or some other role. With The Solution, we are on our own, but we are not alone as we were when we were children. We have our ACA group, the fellowship, and a Higher Power to rely upon. With help and support, we learn what it means to be a Loving Parent to ourselves.

Becoming our own Loving Parent means that many of us come to believe that our Higher Power is our actual parent. Our biological parents were the couple needed to bring us into the world. The birth

parents passed on the disease of family dysfunction that affects us in our lives today. Our Higher Power is the parent who gives us unconditional love and the way out of confusion and self-abuse. The Higher Power gave us the Twelve Steps.

Becoming our own Loving Parent – reparenting ourselves – requires that we accept the reality of the Inner Child. The child within is our original identity which knows how to love and trust freely. We become willing to consistently seek out and integrate the Inner Child into our lives. By making the effort, the child within becomes our guide to feelings, creativity, and spirituality. Through reparenting, we learn to listen for the child within. We can restage our childhood and teen years with gentleness by being a Loving Parent to ourselves. With the help of our ACA friends, we learn how to fill in the nurturing and attention we did not receive as children.

Many adult children can be lukewarm to the notion of a Loving Parent who lives inside of them and who is thoughtful and affirming. They can more easily identify with a Critical Parent who is harsh or who produces consistent self-doubt from within. Many of us can accept the idea of an inner Critical Parent but balk at the notion of a loving one.

Reparenting ourselves in a loving manner is not as unique as it sounds. Most of us were forced to parent ourselves as children. Our parents or

relatives were not available. They were often not present with emotion or care. When they were present, they were not attentive. In their absence, we parented ourselves in a caring manner. As children, we met our own needs by preparing our own meals or doing housework. Some of us saved our own money and bought school supplies or small gifts for ourselves or a sibling. We knew our parents would forget or would trivialize birthdays or holidays. In some cases we parented a brother or sister with more care than our dysfunctional parents had to offer. We readied a sibling for school, reviewed homework, bought food, and read to a brother or sister at night. Even if we were not always kind to a brother or sister, we can still see moments when we cared for them or were concerned about them.

In some homes, we were provided with all we needed and told often that we were loved. However, our parents were adult children themselves out of touch with feelings and true intimacy. We seemed to have everything we needed, but we faced unreasonable expectations and cutting criticism. We were forced to parent ourselves into perfectionism to win family approval. We parented ourselves to make perfect grades and to appear self-sufficient and independent.

If we were violent or self-destructive as children, we can still see moments when we hoped for or believed in affectionate care. As adults,

we can ask ourselves how a Loving Parent would care for a neglected child. We can do these caring things for ourselves.

Whatever our behavior was as children, we learned parenting skills or have the potential to learn. Our potential is a combination of survival skills and true love for ourselves. Our caring nature is a solid foundation for developing the Loving Parent inside each of us. We were willing to care for others, so why not for ourselves? Why not ask a Loving Parent to help us reclaim our childhood innocence and to live more gently today?

Parenting ourselves as children and reparenting ourselves as adults has important distinctions. We were alone as children, and we were forced to grow up too soon. We are not alone as we reparent ourselves in ACA. Through recovery, we use reparenting to connect with ourselves and others in a healthy manner. Reparenting also gives us a chance to reclaim our childhood years in a more supportive light. We can use reparenting to salvage our displaced childhood years. We can reclaim and restage those childhood years. We do not fictionalize our childhood, but we take the time to see how vulnerable, courageous, and loving we were as children. We can give ourselves the care we gave others. This is how we go forward in life by knowing where we came from and how we survived to get here.

## Review of Key Terms

Before continuing with the chapter, we will review important terms that have been introduced thus far and which will be explained in greater detail going forward. The terms are:

1. **Inner Child** – The original person, being, or force which we truly are. Some ACA members call this the True Self.
2. **False Self** – The addicted or codependent self.
3. **Loving Parent or reparenting** – The inner parent we can develop from the part of us that took action to care for ourselves as children and which can be awakened in recovery.
4. **Critical Parent** – The hypercritical and judgmental voice that frequently finds fault in our thoughts and actions. This includes the frequent blaming of ourselves and others.

## Loving Parent

What does it mean to become your own Loving Parent? The first step in reparenting ourselves involves recognizing the loving voice inside. Our experience shows that every adult child has love inside regardless of what the person says or believes. Love is there and it is original.

As we awaken the Loving Parent inside, we remember a simple slogan: “First Things First.” Many adult children rush into Inner Child work without taking time to meet their inner, caring parent. As a result, some of us will struggle with finding the Inner Child until we take this

necessary step. The Inner Child will not usually emerge until we establish our Loving Parent. In some cases, a sabotaging aspect of the Inner Child will emerge if we rush this phase of our recovery. This angry aspect of the Inner Child can overpower the newly developing Loving Parent and delay recovery.

There are many ways to awaken the Loving Parent inside, including writing a letter. We might say, “Dear, Loving Parent. I recognize you, and I am depending on you to help me be gentler with myself and more accepting of myself. Please challenge me to try if I am apathetic, but also help me give myself a break if I judge myself too harshly. Help me focus on progress rather than perfection.” We keep the letter handy and read it often until it feels natural to make contact with this loving part of ourselves.

Reparenting ourselves can mean many things, but the central theme is that we are willing to challenge our critical, inner voice and to care for the child within. By reparenting ourselves, we lose interest in harming ourselves with addictions and compulsions. We remind ourselves that we have worth. We do this as often as it takes without thought of the repetition or how it might sound to another person.

With a Loving Parent active in our lives, we stop assuming we have done something wrong when we encounter situations that have no right

or wrong outcome. On the other hand, if we are a compulsive blamer, we stop looking for people to blame for our decisions. As a Loving Parent to ourselves, we pause and listen for the things we tell ourselves on a daily basis without thinking about their meaning. Most of us judge, criticize, condemn, or minimize ourselves without realizing the harm we commit against our soul. Even the adult child who seems to blame others without mercy, secretly believes he or she has little value as a person.

If ACA was a fellowship about becoming your own Critical Parent, the meeting rooms would be empty. There would be no need for meetings or Step work because we already know how to be a Critical Parent to ourselves. We need no lesson here. We wrote the book on being hypercritical and abandoning of ourselves.

We awaken the Loving Parent inside by actively listening to what we tell ourselves about ourselves. We stop in mid- sentence if we are putting ourselves down or criticizing our thoughts or behaviors. We identify the source of the negativity which is the inner critic inside all adult children. We face this critical voice with affirmations that state who we truly are. Through reparenting ourselves, we reframe our mistakes as chances to learn or grow emotionally. This is a sign of becoming our own Loving Parent.

Another way in which we can become our own Loving Parent is to realize that we will not recover overnight. ACA recovery takes time. Even when we attend meetings, work the Steps, and use the telephone, we can still struggle at times. ACA is simple, but it takes a balanced effort and patience at times to make it through. We can do everything right and still wonder if we are making progress. A Loving Parent inside reminds us that we are good enough and that we are making progress.

We must realize most adult children arrive in ACA as the result of a crisis. Some of us have pulled down our worlds around us. That is the power of a codependent bottom. We arrive in ACA with relationship troubles, employment problems, or legal problems. Some of us cannot hold a job or we job-hop. We can owe large sums of money in child support, or we have towering credit card debt. Some of us are bankrupt due to our codependent and selfish behavior. Some of us may be facing prison due to our law-breaking ways. We can be impatient. We attend meetings and find some relief, but we struggle with seeing how meetings can pay an overdue electric bill or how working the Steps can fix a blown car engine. We want to talk about our problems rather than talk about the Twelve Steps or taking action. Our sponsor wisely reminds us that recovery comes first. We cannot fix our car, pay bills, or stay out of jail without recovery. We are asked to attend meetings and stay focused on our program. Our Loving Parent inside agrees with the sponsor.

We must be patient with ourselves during these times. If we try to pull it all together again too quickly, we can create stumbling blocks in our program. We can doubt the need to be gentle and loving to ourselves. For example, the adult child who has brought financial problems to the family might want to work overtime to make things right. Spurred by guilt, the mother or father will work extra hours that take away from the person's ACA program and from the family. Long work days without ACA meetings create a sense of isolation for the recovering adult child. We can take back our self-will and begin to run our own lives without asking for help. We forget that we can talk about our feelings. We forget that we are not alone. During these times, the critical inner parent usually reemerges in greater force. Our program suffers and the family or spouse begins to complain as well. We can begin to feel resentment and think about quitting ACA. With this attitude, talk of a Loving Parent seems foolish or unrealistic for some. In these moments we stop. We think about what we really want out of life. Do we want harmful stress and self-will or do we want to work toward self-love and serenity? A Loving Parents reminds us that we have a choice today. We can take care of ourselves. We can be patient with ourselves. We can pick up the "1,000-pound" telephone and talk to someone.

That said, we know that picking up the telephone or asking for help is not easy for us. Most adult children are compulsively self-reliant. We

learned in childhood to avoid asking for help or that accepting help came with strings attached. We can try to work ACA alone or with limited input from a sponsor. The program that we fashion for ourselves is different than the ACA program, so we struggle. At the same time, other ACA members can be compulsive talkers who think that calling someone and talking at great length about their issues is asking for help. These adult children rarely take direction or accept helpful suggestions that would lead to change. Typically, these adult children do not consider the need for a Loving Parent or focused Step work.

A stumbling block in awakening our Loving Parent involves false loyalty. By reparenting ourselves, we can believe we are being disloyal to our families. We can think that talking about our lives and our needs is selfish and disloyal. We learned this false loyalty from childhood. Most of us were usually parented to be hypercritical and self-judging. We were taught to doubt ourselves so it became natural to believe that we are wrong, defective, or uninformed. A Loving Parent asks us to think about what we have been told about ourselves. A Loving Parent supports us in breaking the loyalty to unhealthy family messages and beliefs.

Affirmations are a key element in challenging our loyalty to a dysfunctional family and changing negative tapes in our heads. We select a few affirmations at the end of this chapter and write them down.

When we begin our day, we can read the affirmations out loud to ourselves. We can take the affirmations with us to work as well and post them inconspicuously where we can see them throughout the day.

## **The Inner Child – True Self**

Once we become comfortable with affirmations and sharing about being a Loving Parent, we are usually ready to make contact with our Inner Child. For many ACA members the child within represents our True Self. This is the part of us that is our original being. The Inner Child has original trust, original belief, and original love. The child within understands feelings and the language of a Higher Power. The Inner Child or True Self is present during our spiritual experiences and underpins our spiritual awakening.

The Inner Child also has all of the mental, physical, and historical memory of the family. One of the surest signs that an Inner Child exists is found in the definition of the term “adult child.” An adult child is someone whose actions and decisions as an adult are guided by childhood experiences grounded in self-doubt or fear. Until we get help, we can operate from childhood fear that threatens our jobs and relationships. Under certain conditions, we can revert to childhood states that are age specific. Many adult children have said they feel like a child in a grown-up body. This is a clue to the Inner Child, but there is much

more. The childhood fears expressed in adulthood are only a fraction of the full nature of the Inner Child.

Adult children who have experienced their Inner Child describe an inner being that is joyful and playful. There is a feeling of lightness and great optimism when the Inner Child is active in one's life. There is trust, spontaneity, and warmth. Many adult children can describe an Inner Child's voice, physical appearance, and likes and dislikes. Meditation and consistent writing with the opposite or non-dominant hand seem to reveal the greater presence of the Inner Child.

Family dysfunction drives the Inner Child into hiding, leaving states of fear that wander the adult's soul. While the Inner Child or True Self can be the spark of our creativity, we must also remember the child is a deeply hurt part of ourselves. Some of us believe the child within can sabotage our current relationships through the fear of abandonment and shame. Through recovery, we have learned that our Inner Child has an array of protective tools. The tools, however, can lead to self-harm and great emotional pain. We can sabotage ourselves as we seek help. This is a paradox of sorts. The Inner Child or True Self is our original wholeness who believed in people without effort. The Inner Child freely gave love and trust without effort. Yet, as a result of abuse, an angry Inner Child can fuel self-destructive behaviors that we seem powerless to stop at times.

An angry child within can exhibit feelings and behaviors of crippling fear and extreme dishonesty. There can be blistering rage. These feelings or behaviors were necessary to survive the unhealthy family. As adults, when we encounter situations that resemble our childhood experiences, we can be rageful. We can seem to lash out at people or co-workers for no cause. We have shocked people with rage, which comes from this hurt child within. We feel embarrassed by our rage, but we also feel powerless to change. We feel sabotaged. The good news is that this hurt child within will listen if we take the time to build trust and intimacy from within.

## **Tools and Techniques for Connecting with our Inner Child**

By keeping the focus on ourselves, we will find freedom from our critical self as well as our addictive and destructive behaviors. The ACA program provides us with tools of recovery. This chapter outlines the steps we take and the tools we use to reparent ourselves and to connect with the child within. Connecting with our Inner Child brings greater integration within ourselves and moves us closer to our Higher Power. Connecting with the Inner Child also helps us remember. One of the rules of a dysfunctional family is “don’t remember.” In ACA, we seek a full remembrance or the most complete remembrance we can obtain of the growing up years. Our memory holds the key to living in the present with a full range of feelings, hope, and spirituality.

First we must be willing. With willingness, we can overcome self-doubt or the sense that we are not making progress. We apply the tools of recovery and make progress at our own pace. We remain free of stagnation by avoiding unwillingness or inaction.

With willingness we attend ACA meetings, work the Twelve Steps, and develop a support system. The support can include ACA members, a healthy socializing group, or family members supportive of our recovery. In ACA, we learn to seek out people who are honest with us and understand what we are trying to accomplish in recovery. Through our Loving Parent, we can feel confident that we can select supportive people. Supportive people tend to be engaged in recovery and are sincere about living differently than in the past. Supportive people are caring people who are intrigued about living. They can notice the wonder in small things or appreciate great accomplishments without jealousy. In addition to being sincere, such people generally talk about feelings and avoid judging others or putting others down. This is the support we seek and learn to feel comfortable with.

Tools for connecting with the Inner Child can be counseling, journaling, and guided meditation in addition to attending ACA meetings.

Childhood pictures are a great tool to connect with the child that still dwells within us.

As mentioned, there is non-dominant handwriting in which we write out a question to our Inner Child with our dominant hand (the hand we use to sign our name). Then we write the response to the question by placing the pen in the opposite hand. We might write out: “Hello, Little Johnny or Little Marie. I would like to talk to you and to introduce myself. How have you been? I am here to listen to you if you would like to talk.”

Write down any response with the non-dominant hand. The thoughts may be random or incomplete sentences, but we write down what comes to mind without judging ourselves. We keep an open mind. We do not try to force solutions or results. We will get results if we are patient and consistent with the exercise.

After introducing ourselves to the child within, we can ask other questions. We write out the question with our dominant hand and write the reply with the other hand. We can talk to others about how they connected with their Inner Child, but we are mindful to be true to our own connection. We do not have to impress anyone or embellish any response. This exercise can literally speak for itself when practiced often.

Others tools for connecting with the Inner Child can involve drawing or painting pictures of our family. We can go to our old school house and sketch the playground, or we can visit a favorite spot and draw or doodle. Sketching our family may reveal insights as to how we felt

growing up. We do not have to be professional artists to do this exercise. Stick figures can work just as well. Some pictures may help express what words cannot. The drawings can be done with our dominant or nondominant hand. There is no limit on what scenes can be drawn.

We can listen to music or dance as part of connecting with the Inner Child or True Self. Moving our bodies to music (or without music) can stir memories and feelings. Listening to various forms of music can help us tap into memories and feelings as well. Nursery rhymes, hymns, or songs our parents listened to will help us remember our childhood and the child within. These activities tend to access areas of our subconscious that

we have not visited for many years. Feelings and memories will emerge if we are consistent with these methods. For many of us we learned to tune out our true feelings because it was too painful to admit we were neglected, abused, or mistreated in various ways. We locked away events of our lives. As adults we learn to free ourselves from our self-imposed prisons. We give ourselves permission to feel and to be truly alive.

Some of us choose to do this work with a sponsor, counselor, or recovery partner. The results of Inner Child work and reparenting pay off in clarity about our childhood years. With time, we can feel more at

peace inside, and we will have a better grasp of our feelings and our choices. We are on the way to becoming whole and healthy human beings. We can connect with a power greater than ourselves and find balance.

## **Identifying Our Inner Critical Parent**

All adult children arrive at ACA with hypercritical messages in their minds. We can judge ourselves or others without mercy. These are the “old tapes” that can pilot our lives onto the jagged rocks of self-destruction. The old tapes can be personified as the inner Critical Parent. This is the critical voice who blames and belittles or who judges and undermines. Becoming aware of the Critical Parent is essential for the development of the Loving Parent.

Many of us do not become fully aware of these negative messages until we stop long enough to hear them. They are there. Each day these messages can create self-doubt, self-disgust, depression, or panic. This is the inner voice or feeling that tells us that we are not good enough, smart enough, or worthy enough for our job or our relationships. There is also the critical inner voice of blaming others.

This unchallenged Critical Parent is the barrier that keeps us from experiencing wholeness and happiness. We can identify this inner critic by keeping a notepad handy for several days. As we go through the day,

we pay attention to our attitude about ourselves or others. We jot down negative thoughts, doubts, and fears as they arise. Judging others and comparing ourselves to others is the classic sign of an inner Critical Parent. Judging someone's clothing or how the person speaks is a sign of the Critical Parent. Judging ourselves harshly for mistakes is the Critical Parent. Comparing ourselves to others financially, physically, or intellectually is the Critical Parent. Assuming we are wrong when something happens that is not our fault is this inner critic. Blaming others or saying "I'm sorry" often is the Critical Parent. Gossiping is this inner critic.

After identifying the Critical Parent, we step up our efforts to delete many of the old messages or to turn down the volume on the negative tapes. By practicing affirmations, we begin to lessen some of the harshness that we have lived with before ACA. These affirmations can be spoken or written as part of the Tenth Step inventory. This is the daily inventory in which we look at our behavior and make amends for harms we have done to others, but we also look at what we have done right or what is positive in ourselves. We can write out affirmations such as: "My feelings are okay." "I am human." "I make mistakes, but I am not a mistake." "I don't have to be perfect." "It is okay to know who I am." We do these affirmations often because creating the Critical Parent took time. It took years of practice to be so critical or doubtful of ourselves.

We cannot change such negativity in one week or one month, but we make a beginning with affirmations. We ask our Higher Power for help as well. After awhile, our Loving Parent awakens, and we are comfortable with affirmations and with believing them. We begin to have the choice of whether we will believe a negative thought, or instead believe a positive message from the program.

Eliminating the inner Critical Parent is not the goal. We seek to integrate this part of ourselves so that we won't go overboard trying to eliminate all negatives from our lives. Eliminating all discomforts or negatives is not practical. It is foolhardy at best. Learning to deal with some internal negativity with the support of an ACA group is healthy. But first, we use the full strength of the program to deal with the inner Critical Parent. We can tell the internal critic to be quiet as we learn to think differently about ourselves.

Some of us use a Twelve Step template to address our Critical Parent. In Step One, for instance, we recognize that we are powerless over this Critical Parent and its judgments. In Steps Two and Three, we ask our Higher Power for guidance. We ask for the strength to turn over the false power wielded by the Critical Parent. We trust that something greater than ourselves can help us release our old way of thinking about things. With Steps Four and Five, whenever we do something that distresses us, we can immediately wrap our arms around ourselves in a hug and say,

“Well, we don’t like how that went, so we will learn a lesson from it and do better next time.” That is what a Loving Parent would do for his or her child within.

With Steps Six and Seven, we ask for the help we need from our Higher Power to integrate the Critical Parent into our lives. Integration is a sign that we recognize that the critical inner voice has some value and should not be totally eliminated. Our critical nature must be toned down, but we also recognize it guided us through dependent times. We cannot live life without judgment, but we seek judgment that takes the course of discernment and fairness instead of comparing ourselves to others. We ask for patience and guidance in tempering the inner critic into usefulness. Facing our own self-criticism with the help of a Higher Power prepares us to face criticism and challenge from others.

With Steps Eight and Nine, we make our amends for any behavior caused by acting under the influence of the Critical Parent. Finally with Steps Ten through Twelve we stay mindful and present. We inventory ourselves, we meditate, and we help others. We acknowledge our own behavior. We ask God, as we understand God, to continue providing us with willingness to love ourselves.

## **ACA Experience: Loving Parent and Inner Child**

The following vignettes offer a variety of ACA experiences involving the Loving Parent and the Inner Child. These brief stories were voluntarily recorded during many years at ACA meetings, conventions, retreats, and by invitation. Since the founding of the adult child movement, the ACA fellowship has taken the lead in developing this new frontier of recovery. ACA members have some of the most comprehensive experience with reparenting themselves and with sketching out the existence of the Inner Child. These shares are the fellowship's first in-depth publishing on this topic. The stories represent honesty, open-mindedness, and willingness. The experiences reveal how ACA members are thoughtful in their approach to identifying the Loving Parent and Inner Child. The reader will see that the realm of Inner Child work, in particular, can be tender and humorous, or it can be volatile and unsettling in some cases.