

Chapter 2

Schemas/Schema Dispositions in Children and Adolescents

(Description adapted from Young et al., 2003)

1. Abandonment/ Instability

Feeling that important caregivers are unable to reliably provide emotional support, attachment, strength or practical protection because they themselves are emotionally unstable and possibly unpredictable, unreliable or only sporadically present.

Typical parent characteristics, thoughts, and coping strategies

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|-------------------------------|---|---|
| Parent characteristics | Unstable connection, inconsistent care and support, frequent change, leaving child behind | |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | I often feel neglected and lonely; there are no real friends or stable people in my life. | |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | Seeks friends who are not stable or inappropriate (e.g. too young, too old) |
| | Avoidance | Rejection of in-depth relationships; flees serious relationships |
| | Overcompensation | High standards with friends; relationships are too close/very intense |

2. Mistrust / Abuse

The expectation that others will hurt, abuse, humiliate, cheat, lie, manipulate, or take advantage. Damage is often perceived as deliberate or a result of neglect.

Typical parent characteristics, thoughts, and coping strategies

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|-------------------------------|--|---|
| Parent characteristics | Emotional, physical or sexual abuse; experiences of being exploited e.g. because of high intellect | |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | Getting too close is dangerous; I must be careful so that I am not exploited or mistreated. | |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | Seeks inappropriately close, exploitative or abusive friendships/ relationships |
| | Avoidance | Fear-laden avoidance of situations in which he/she might be exploited or abused |
| | Overcompensation | Chooses friends who can be dominated, exploited or possibly humiliated |

3. Emotional Deprivation

Expectation that one's desire for a normal degree of emotional support will not be adequately met by others. The three major forms of deprivation are:

- A. Deprivation of Nurture: Absence of attention, affection, warmth, or companionship.
- B. Deprivation of Empathy: Absence of understanding, listening, self-disclosure, or mutual sharing of feelings from others.
- C. Deprivation of Protection: Absence of strength, direction, or guidance from others.

Typical parent characteristics, thoughts, and coping strategies

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|-------------------------------|------------------|--|
| Parent characteristics | | Neglect, emotional coldness, rejection; eg cold parents, busy parents, famous parents |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | | I often get the short end of the stick; nobody supports me/ understands me. Others do not accept my feelings. |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | Has friends who are emotionally distant; does not demand satisfaction of his/her own needs; puts up with rejection |
| | Avoidance | Emotional and social withdrawal; daydreaming |
| | Overcompensation | Emotionally demanding behavior; unpredictable relationship patterns; neglectful of other people's needs |

4. Defectiveness / Shame

Feeling inadequate, bad, undesirable, inferior or fundamentally deficient in certain important areas.

- Fear that others might discover that you are not lovable.
- Hypersensitivity to criticism, rejection; bias,
- Uncertainty in dealing with others;
- Feeling of shame regarding perceived flaws.

Typical parent characteristics, thoughts, and coping strategies

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|-------------------------------|------------------|--|
| Parent characteristics | | Humiliating the child in front of others; lack of regard for the child's boundaries; shaming of the child's normal emotional needs |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | | I feel so defective and bad and I think I am not lovable; because I make so many mistakes, I feel inferior. |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | Having friendships characterized by embarrassment; accepts being a scapegoat |
| | Avoidance | Shows introverted, tense behavior; conceals his/her own feelings and opinions |
| | Overcompensation | Excessive self-aggrandizement, or harsh criticism and degradation of others |

5. Social Isolation / Alienation

The feeling that one is isolated from the rest of the world, different from other people, and/or not part of any group or community.

Typical parent characteristics, thoughts, and coping strategies

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|-------------------------------|------------------|--|
| Parent characteristics | | Socially isolated family; often caused by immigrant status, ethnic minority, or some other social exclusion (e.g. socioeconomic class) |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | | I am different, my family is different; I don't fit in; no one understands me |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | Acceptance of exclusion; embraces being a loner |
| | Avoidance | Avoids friendships and group activities |
| | Overcompensation | Indiscriminate pursuit of relationships; wants to be everybody's friend; strongly adaptive behavior without resistance |

6. Dependence/ Incompetence

Belief that one is unable to handle one's everyday responsibilities in a competent manner, without considerable help from others (e.g., take care of oneself, solve daily problems, exercise good judgment, tackle new tasks, make good decisions). Often presents as helplessness.

Typical parent characteristics, thoughts, and coping strategies

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|-------------------------------|------------------|---|
| Parent characteristics | | Overcautious parents who want to control the child's experiences; possibly parents with anxiety disorders or trauma |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | | I am weak and helpless; I cannot do things without my parents or teacher; making decisions is really hard for me. |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | Asks parents to take care of his/her own interests, such as making connections with other kids or doing homework |
| | Avoidance | Avoids challenges and important tasks; hands over responsibility to others |
| | Overcompensation | Does reckless things with overconfidence; looks for "powerful" friends; does not allow help or support when necessary |

7. Vulnerability to Harm

Exaggerated fear that imminent catastrophe will strike at any time and that one will be unable to prevent it. Fears focus on one or more of the following:

- Medical Catastrophes: e.g., heart attacks, AIDS;
- Emotional Catastrophes: e.g., going crazy;
- External Catastrophes: e.g., elevators collapsing, victimized by criminals, airplane crashes, earthquakes.

Typical parent characteristics, thoughts, and coping strategies

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|-------------------------------|------------------|---|
| Parent characteristics | | Overcautious parents who warn against diseases and accidents with high levels of control and exaggerated precautions |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | | I must be careful wherever I am; the world is dangerous; it is very risky to do anything. |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | Distressed by negative or scary news stories; hyper-vigilant to health and safety issues; always has a cell phone or another means of contact |
| | Avoidance | "Couch potato" existence, avoiding potentially hazardous situations; may use anger/defiance to avoid feared situations |
| | Overcompensation | Cocky behavior; sensation-seeking; behaves carelessly and irresponsibly, sometimes causing accidents or harm |

8. Enmeshment / Undeveloped Self

Excessive emotional involvement and closeness with one or more significant others (often parents), at the expense of full individuation or normal social development. Often involves the belief that at least one of the enmeshed individuals cannot survive or be happy without the constant support of the other. May also include feelings of being smothered by, or fused with, others OR insufficient individual identity. Often experienced as a feeling of emptiness and floundering, having no direction, or in extreme cases questioning one's existence.

Typical parent characteristics, thoughts, and coping strategies

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|-------------------------------|------------------|--|
| Parent characteristics | | Children become dependent on their parents (e.g. parentification, partner compensation); when children show bad behavior, parents' reactions are preachy and sanctimonious, thereby generating feelings of guilt |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | | I need my parents and they need me; I am obliged to tell them everything about my life and to do everything they want me to. |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | Hesitant to abandon dysfunctional friendships; overly supports parents; being a "pseudo-adult" counselor, dismisses own needs |
| | Avoidance | Avoids Parent proximity and close friendships, e.g. going abroad, living a socially isolated life |
| | Overcompensation | Overly self-sufficient; isolates him/herself; unresponsive to the needs of others; persistent superficiality in relationships |

9. Failure

The belief that one has failed, will inevitably fail, or is fundamentally inadequate relative to one's peers, in areas of achievement (school, career, sports, etc.). Often involves beliefs that one is stupid, inept, untalented, ignorant, lower in status, less successful than others, etc.

Typical parent characteristics, thoughts, and coping strategies

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|-------------------------------|------------------|---|
| Parent characteristics | | Inadequate support and encouragement in coping with developmental tasks; devaluation of the child's abilities; sees normal mistakes as indicating stupidity |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | | I am afraid to fail (for example, in school or sports); I often feel stupid; others are much better than me |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | Selects tasks and challenges below their own level; defers boring jobs; shows stoic acceptance of lack of stimulation |
| | Avoidance | Avoids interesting, challenging activities; refusal to try new or difficult tasks |
| | Overcompensation | Excessive striving for perfection and difficult task selection; pushes him/herself to be successful |

10. Entitlement/ Grandiosity

The belief that one is superior to other people; entitled to special rights and privileges; or not bound by the rules of reciprocity that guide normal social interaction. Often involves insistence that one should be able to do or have whatever one wants, regardless of what is realistic, what others consider reasonable, or the cost to others; or an exaggerated focus on superiority (e.g., being among the most successful, famous, wealthy) - in order to achieve power or control (not primarily for attention or approval). Sometimes includes excessive competitiveness toward, or domination of, others: asserting one's power, forcing one's point of view, or controlling the behaviour of others in line with one's own desires---without empathy or concern for others' needs or feelings.

Typical parent characteristics, thoughts, and coping strategies

| | | |
|-------------------------------|------------------|---|
| Parent characteristics | | Indulgence, lack of structure and limit setting; child is treated like a prince or princess; all of their desires are instantly gratified |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | | I do not need to learn new things; homework is for "stupid people" only; rules that everyone follows do not apply to me because I am special. |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | Lack of self-reflection; doesn't perceive others' needs or consciously ignores them; claims to have his or her own set of rules; brags about his or her own success; wants to impose his or her own will onto others; know-it-all |
| | Avoidance | Avoids situations where they will likely "only" accomplish average success and not be the best |
| | Overcompensation | Focuses intensively on the needs of others; does things like completing other students' homework |

11. Insufficient Self-control/ -discipline

Pervasive difficulty or refusal to exercise sufficient self-control and frustration tolerance to achieve one's personal goals, or to restrain the excessive expression of one's emotions and impulses. In its milder form, patient presents with an exaggerated emphasis on discomfort-avoidance: avoiding pain, conflict, confrontation, responsibility, or overexertion---at the expense of personal fulfilment, commitment, or integrity.

Typical parent characteristics, thoughts, and coping strategies

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|-------------------------------|------------------|--|
| Parent characteristics | | Undisciplined parents or those who encourage capricious behavior driven by the pleasure principle |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | | I can't complete boring tasks; instead I am looking for something else I can do. |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | Breaks rules and promises; indifferent towards performance requirements |
| | Avoidance | Avoidance of conflicts, challenges, social obligations and responsibilities |
| | Overcompensation | Extreme ambition to the point of self-flagellation with emphasis on discipline and requirements; high or compulsive self-control |

12. Subjugation

Excessive surrendering of control to others because one feels coerced / compelled - usually to avoid anger, retaliation, or abandonment. The two major forms of subjugation are:

- Subjugation of Needs: Suppression of one's preferences, decisions, and desires.
- Subjugation of Emotions: Suppression of emotional expression, especially anger.

Usually involves the perception that one's own desires, opinions, and feelings are not valid or important to others. Frequently presents as excessive compliance, combined with hypersensitivity to feeling trapped. Generally leads to a build up of anger, manifested in maladaptive symptoms (e.g., passive-aggressive behaviour, uncontrolled outbursts of temper, psychosomatic symptoms, withdrawal of affection, "acting out", and substance abuse).

Typical parent characteristics, thoughts, and coping strategies

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|-------------------------------|------------------|---|
| Parent characteristics | | Parents with authoritarian style; if the child is submissive, then they will be rewarded with love and care |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | | What I feel and think is not important; others know better than me; they should decide how things have to be done. |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | Selects more assertive and dominant friends; subordination; ingratiating behavior; anticipatory obedience |
| | Avoidance | Avoidance of situations in which conflicts could arise, e.g. unstructured situations with no clear rules, like the schoolyard |
| | Overcompensation | Rebellion against authority; reacts against any regulation in social structures |

13. Self-Sacrifice

Excessive focus on voluntarily meeting the needs of others in daily situations, at the expense of one's own gratification. The most common reasons are:

- to prevent causing pain to others; to avoid guilt from feeling selfish; or
- to maintain the connection with others perceived as needy.

Often results from an acute sensitivity to the pain of others. Sometimes leads to a sense that one's own needs are not being adequately met and to resentment of those who are taken care of. (Overlaps with concept of co-dependency).

Typical parent characteristics, thoughts, and coping strategies

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|-------------------------------|------------------|--|
| Parent characteristics | | Parents in need of care or support, who tend towards parentification; oblivious to child's needs |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | | Without me, everything collapses; if I didn't do all the things I do, nothing would work properly. |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | Strives for positions with high responsibility; tendency to be exploited; doesn't allow his or her own needs to be met |
| | Avoidance | Prefers impersonal situations where give-and-take is not important (e.g. highly structured social situations, such as a gym) |
| | Overcompensation | Overemphasized separation from obligations; selfishness |

14. Approval-Seeking

Excessive emphasis on gaining approval, recognition, or attention from other people, or fitting in, at the expense of developing a secure and true sense of self. One's sense of esteem is dependent primarily on the reactions of others rather than on one's own natural inclinations. Sometimes includes an overemphasis on status, appearance, social acceptance, money, or achievement -- as means of gaining approval, admiration, or attention (not primarily for power or control). Frequently results in major life decisions that are inauthentic or unsatisfying; or in hypersensitivity to rejection.

Typical parent characteristics, thoughts, and coping strategies

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|-------------------------------|------------------|---|
| Parent characteristics | | Recognition and acceptance based on school performance or social competence, conditional love |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | | I have to show people how good/excellent I am, otherwise I feel restless and unsatisfied. |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | Tries to impress others with activities and achievements, seeks performance-based situations and relationships with continuous feedback |
| | Avoidance | Avoids close relationships, but still hopes for praise and recognition |
| | Overcompensation | Refuses to be the center of attention, stays in the background |

15. Negativity/ Pessimism

A pervasive, lifelong focus on the negative aspects of life (pain, death, loss, disappointment, conflict, guilt, resentment, unsolved problems, potential mistakes, betrayal, things that could go wrong, etc.) while minimizing or neglecting the positive or optimistic aspects. Usually includes an exaggerated expectation-- in a wide range of work, financial, or interpersonal situations -- that things will eventually go seriously wrong, or that aspects of one's life that seem to be going well will ultimately fall apart. Usually involves an inordinate fear of making mistakes that might lead to: financial collapse, loss, humiliation, or being trapped in a bad situation. Because potential negative outcomes are exaggerated, these patients are frequently characterized by chronic worry, vigilance, complaining, or indecision.

Typical parent characteristics, thoughts, and coping strategies

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|-------------------------------|------------------|---|
| Parent characteristics | | Overanxious parents with black and white thinking and a tendency to see every situation as a potential disaster, chronic illness or mental ill health |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | | My happiness is temporary; something bad will inevitably happen; things will be worse than I can even imagine. |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | Focuses on negative details and remembers them to use as proof that things always go wrong; always expects the worst |
| | Avoidance | Distracts himself/herself; evades unpleasant thoughts or experiences |
| | Overcompensation | Exaggerated optimism; denies unpleasant facts |

16. Emotional Inhibition

The excessive inhibition of spontaneous action, feeling, or communication -- usually to avoid disapproval by others, feelings of shame, or losing control of one's impulses. The most common areas of inhibition involve: (a) inhibition of anger & aggression; (b) inhibition of positive impulses (e.g., joy, affection, sexual excitement, play); (c) difficulty expressing vulnerability or communicating freely about one's feelings, needs, etc.; or (d) excessive emphasis on rationality while disregarding emotions.

Typical parent characteristics, thoughts, and coping strategies

| | | |
|-------------------------------|------------------|---|
| Parent characteristics | | Emotionally cool, rational parents, who devalue spontaneity and "silly" behavior |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | | It is not acceptable to show any emotions or behave in an irrational, childish, or silly way. |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | Constant effort to be serious, behaves in an overly controlled manner |
| | Avoidance | Avoids situations that trigger emotions, avoids talking about emotions |
| | Overcompensation | Makes herself/himself the center attention (clown-like), but is being laughed at rather than recognized |

17. Unrelenting Standards

The underlying belief that one must strive to meet very high internalized standards of behaviour and performance, usually to avoid criticism. Typically results in feelings of pressure or difficulty slowing down; and in hyper criticalness toward oneself and others. Must involve significant impairment in: pleasure, relaxation, health, self-esteem, sense of accomplishment, or satisfying relationships.

Unrelenting standards typically present as:

- a. perfectionism, inordinate attention to detail, or an underestimation of how good one's own performance is relative to the norm;
- b. rigid rules and "shoulds" in many areas of life, including unrealistically high moral, ethical, cultural, or religious precepts; or
- c. preoccupation with time and efficiency, so that more can be accomplished.

Typical parent characteristics, thoughts, and coping strategies

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|-------------------------------|------------------|--|
| Parent characteristics | | Had to work hard for success; believes that someone who has no success must have been lazy or inefficient, highly religious |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | | The only way I can be lovable is by achieving something. |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | High-reaching ambition, perfectionism with constant pressure, spends a lot of time focused on learning and achievement |
| | Avoidance | Avoids performance-related situations; procrastinates; evades assessments or evaluations; does not take part in competitions |
| | Overcompensation | Criticizes performance tests; deliberately ignores performance standards; acts intentionally careless in performance-focused scenarios |

18. Punitiveness

The belief that people should be harshly punished for making mistakes. Involves the tendency to be angry, intolerant, punitive, and impatient with those people (including oneself) who do not meet one's expectations or standards. Usually includes difficulty forgiving mistakes in oneself or others, because of a reluctance to consider extenuating circumstances, allow for human imperfection, or empathize with feelings.

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| Parent characteristics | | Authoritarian upbringing; harsh consequences for making mistakes; parents maintain power over the child or others |
| Child's/adolescent's thoughts | | If I make a mistake, I deserve punishment. |
| Coping strategies | Surrender | Punishes himself/herself for human imperfection; treats himself/herself and others severely for making mistakes |
| | Avoidance | Social withdrawal because of fear of making mistakes or being punished |
| | Overcompensation | Behaves in an overly indulgent manner, but occasionally shows a tendency towards excessive punishment |

Literature:

Young, J. E., Klosko, J. S., & Weishaar, M. E. (2003). *Schema therapy: A practitioner's guide*. Guilford Press.