

# The Structure of a High Structured Environment

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## Definitions

First let's agree on what a high structured environment is not. It is not scheduling, it is neither dates on a calendar nor activities on certain days and times. It is not inflexibility, it does not place requirements but it provides opportunities and affords growth. A high structured environment should never be an euphemism for punishment.

This structure is the framework upon which an environment of healing can be constructed. Its purpose is to provide protection and predictability equally for the parents and the child.

To be beneficial a high structured environment must be anchored to something that is both rock-solid and true. The structure must provide an unyielding support system that will exceed even the most rigorous testing of it's intrinsic strength.

When the fabric of a high structured environment is comprised of proven principles that have predictable, repeatable outcomes; then confidence, reliance and ultimately, trust will occur. When trust exists hope can be fostered. Healing of old deep wounds requires trust and hope in tandem.

None of us receive, nor do we need, exactly the same things in this life as those around us. We each have different and unique life experiences, even from that of our own siblings. We independently define and prioritize our values, our likes and dislikes and our

wants. While there many of these overlap with those of other people, some remain only ours. A high structured environment must be put together based on the needs and the circumstances of the individuals utilizing that structure.

We humans use very general and sanitized terms to describe early childhood traumas. We might say; "This child was neglected.", or "That child suffered sexual abuse." Perhaps we might describe another child as a "sexual perpetrator" or as 'malnourished". None of these terms even approach describing the depth of trauma, the intensity of emotions or the continual ongoing festering of the inflicted injuries which these children have endured.

Perhaps we do this to help us cope. These things are disturbing and unsettling to our core values and belief systems. By stating them using words detached from actual events, we provide ourselves a way to discuss and attempt remediation of the terrible effects that these events have on our children.

Abused and neglected children are not afforded this luxury. They do not reside in a sanitized world. Each day, each hour, each minute their minds and their bodies remember and re-experience trauma. It is not optional for them. They had no say the first time it happened to them, and they have no say today as the cells in their bodies and brains re-live, over and over, those events. Their coping skills are their behaviors. Their

behaviors are used to classify and diagnosis their disorders.

### **Free Will**

Most human beings have been endowed with free will. That is, they have the ability to make a decision between at least two choices. Which choice is selected always is a result of decision they have made. That decision may have been made hastily or contemplatively. It may have been made in anger or influenced by the presence of others. Yet, in all cases, that decision and the selection of choice belongs to the individual making the choice. They have exercised their free will.

While the decision and resulting choice always is the providence of the choice maker; the outcome or consequences (favorable or unfavorable) of that choice usually cannot be determined by the choice maker.

Many times the resulting consequences are not even predictable or foreseeable at the time the choice is selected.

***Each individual always makes his or her own choices and someone else always selects the consequences yet the choice maker always experiences those consequences.***

Therefore, one of the functions of a high structured environment is to focus on the importance of a proper and effective method of exercising one's free will. A symbiotic relationship must develop between the child and the parents. The parents need to organize and present to the child opportunities for choices that are prearranged and scripted in such a manner as to promote success for the

child. The parents then get to pick consequences for the child that will encourage healing.

Warning, warning **warning!** The parents also need to be willing to receive the consequences of their chosen directives to the child in the form of the child's negative behavior; that's the symbiotic part. Parents must always view the child's negative behavior as a gauge of what the child is feeling. It is not a measurement of how well the parent is doing.

It is vital to recognize and understand the importance of this part of the structure if the child is to have an opportunity to heal. These children have zero trust. They don't trust others, and they don't trust their own ability to make good choices. What they do have is an abiding sense of constant immanent doom accompanied by physical pain caused by emotional and physical trauma.

When they were small and during the time when most children were starting to associate their choices with results, the consequences that came their way had no basis to any sense of logic or constancy.

When they were hungry and communicated their hunger by crying any number of things could happen; they might have been fed, they might have been fed whiskey, they might have been ignored, they might have been beat, they might have been held, they might have been shaken. All these different responses could happen with a cry.

There was no method provided by their caretaker while in their infancy for

reasonable or logical expectations to develop. Cause and effect thinking is not present in their brains today because of early childhood experiences. Their caregiver of today must provide that which their caregiver of their infancy did not.

No healing of any sort, of any type or of any amount can occur without the trust of the child. A child that does not trust themselves can never entrust themselves to someone else to facilitate healing. A child will learn to trust their ability to choose only after they have repeatedly experienced successful choices.

This first principle of our structured environment could be stated as:

**Purposeful opportunities for the child to make choices must be given and scripted with imposed consequences that reaffirm the good judgment of the choice.**

*This principle must be anchored in the parents' commitment to helping the child heal and the parents' ability to maintain that commitment by being an observer of the child's behavior as opposed to a participant with the child in their pathology.*

### **Love**

The adage states; "Money can not buy happiness". I would add, "Neither does poverty".

The currency that we will use in our structured environment is *Love*. This seems such a complicated concept to quantify. Our society uses this word to represent a large array of feelings, responsibilities and needs. It is

sometimes difficult to convey a single meaning.

However, I think there are at least two characterizations of Love that most of us will have very similar understandings about. The first is about how we might receive love. It can be found in Elizabeth Randolph's book "Broken Hearts - Wounded Minds" where she describes what she calls the "love hierarchy".

According to Dr. Randolph, all humans want *unconditional love* but seldom encounter it. They instead settle for the next tier in the hierarchy, which is *acceptance*. "If you accept me for who I am then I am loved".

When we don't receive acceptance, we then reconcile ourselves to the next tier which is *approval*: "If I get good grades, or have a good job, or a fancy car, then you'll approve of me and that means that I'm loved."

If approval is not available then people will substitute *being right* for being loved. "As long as I am right, then I am loved".

Finally when unconditional love, acceptance, approval or being right are not experienced the only thing left is *not to be wrong*. "Being wrong means not to be loved or being not lovable."

Probably most of the children that we see have slid down to the last tier of never being wrong about anything. That is why they will defend to the death their position about anything and everything.

This is called *crazy lying*. It will make absolutely no difference to them if every other person on the entire planet felt

differently on an issue, these children will protect and argue their position. They will not acquiesce.

The second depiction of love relates to how we might offer love. I have a friend who operates a successful wilderness program for troubled children. It does not operate on the “boot camp” approach of whipping kids into shape, but instead is based around the child forming a connection with the land and learning how to become self reliant. It uses a theme of respect and is patterned after the life style of how some Native American Indian tribes lived their lives. (In fact it takes its’ name from that of an ancient American Indian tribe.)

One of the precepts taught is that there are always two ways to do anything. One, with a *heart at war*, the other with a *heart at peace*. The effectiveness of doing something is mainly determined by the heart that was used, rather than by the skills used.

This philosophy has seemed to hold true in my life. If I have a warring heart, I need to also have the weapons of war with me. I store these weapons carefully and they are always immediately available if I need them.

When I have a warring heart, with my wife for example, I can recall every previous argument that we have had; each perceived injustice and all accusations leveled against me.

These are my weapons of war. I have weapons of war stashes that are available for use with several people in my life.

Something else also happens, when I have a warring heart I can no longer see

the person. If I have a warring heart with a child; I can not see the child. I can only see their pathology. I do not see a struggling hurt little boy or girl who is trying to make sense out of a nonsensical world; I see a jerk who just chucked a rock through my window because they didn’t like what was served for dinner.

When I have a peaceful heart I have access to the tools of peace. I can use patience, understanding and insight. I can see the person. I can see their heart with its abrasions and wounds. I can feel empathy. I will want to comfort them and I might be able to help them heal.

These children can only feel loved by not ever being wrong. The child’s life paradigm is incorrect, therefore the child *is* wrong and will consider them self to be unlovable.

The child will only be able to accept love after they have moved up the love hierarchy.

So the second principle of our structure is: **The parents must provide love to the child with a peaceful heart. The parents must receive love from a source other than the child.**

*This principle must be anchored in the parents’ relationships with others because these children can not, and will not reciprocate love. Parents must have in-place a means to recharge their emotional batteries.*

## **Responsibility**

I was about 10 years old when the new subdivision was built two blocks away from my parents’ house. Previously it had been a fenced pasture with horses in

it. The people that lived there were house movers and I always pictured the horses pulling a house down the road.

The houses were bigger and nicer than those in the subdivision where I lived. There were side walks and high curbs. We had only rolled curbing in my area, no side walks.

A great place to ride bikes, the paved streets wound and curved around through the neighborhood and the sidewalks made your bike's wheels click as you rode upon them. Access to the sidewalks was available at driveways and alley entrances.

He was a neighborhood boy, in the new subdivision. A bit older than I, he also would cruise the sidewalks on his bike. But he accessed the sidewalks differently. He would jump the curb! He would face that high curb head-on, on his bike, and his bike would fly over the curb and land on the sidewalk. And with smug confidence he would continue down the sidewalk. He did not need a driveway. He did not need an alley.

It was a day of reckoning, a day of commitment, it was a test of courage. Innumerable times before I had set my sights on that high curb. I had approached it with confidence; but each time I had veered away at the very last moment. I had succumbed to the fear inside me of impending danger as I had raced towards that high curb. But that day there would be no turning back.

I placed myself on my bike directly across the intersection, I would be entering the sidewalk just past the corner.

With all my strength I pushed down the pedal and with each successive push I increased the speed of my bike. My hands tightly gripped the handle bars and my eyes steadfastly fixed upon that approaching high curb. Today would be the day I would conquer.

My front wheel lodged between the curb and the rain gutter. The momentum carried the rest of my bike up and forward. I became a projectile. I landed on the sidewalk, my arms sustained various scrapes. I hurt. I hurt a lot. I picked up my bike, rode home where my Mom fixed me.

I learned not too long after that, one just needs to pull up on your bike's handle bars and you can easily jump almost any curb. It was never a matter of courage. It was never a matter of commitment. It had always been a matter of my lack of knowledge.

Who was responsible for my lack of knowledge. Was it the other neighborhood kid? No. Was it my Mother? No. The responsibility was mine. It was my responsibility to find out how to do that jump.

Unlike me, these injured children did not cause their injuries. Moms and Dads, you can not just fix them as my Mom fixed my abrasions.

While there may have been some injuries on the outside, the most serious injuries are on the inside; inside their hearts and inside their brains.

You become their greatest cheerleaders and instructors, you become their advocates; your empathy will help them carry on those times they fail.

You must let them keep their responsibility of doing the work needed for healing. Their task is to work in therapy; to learn and practice new skills which will allow them to function and succeed in the real world, to learn how to trust, to hope, to love.

Your task is to provide opportunity, a safe environment and an understanding heart. You can not successfully do their task for them. If you attempt to do so, you will fail and they will fail.

They can not do your task for you, if you let them try, again, you both will fail. Success is only possible when each does their own responsibility.

The third principle: **Parents must allow the child to keep the responsibility of “working on their life” by kindly and firmly holding the child to task, being empathic when they fail and encouraging them as they restart the task.**

*This principle must be anchored in the parents understanding of how huge and deep the child’s wounds are: how terrifying it is for the child to address them in therapy and how invasive and completely they are embedded into the child, even at the very cell level.*

### **Therapeutic Development**

The function of a high structure environment is to promote positive development and provide for healthy maturing of the child. The goal is to utilize treatment techniques in a therapeutic setting accompanied with the correct and effective therapy for the

proper and accurate diagnosis of the child.

The result should be gradual lessening and eventual removal of the high structure environment. This is accomplished as the child continues to internalize new thinking patterns, conscience development and expansion their own self-regulatory abilities.

The high structure environment is intended to be transitory. As victories are won, and previous poor behaviors are replaced with improved conduct, it is important to relegate past injuries, received by the parents from the child, to the rubbish pile. They were a necessary part of the child’s healing process and are no longer of any importance.

Parents should come to understand that some of the harmful and hurtful behaviors of the child, occurred as part of the pathology.

The child may not be able to recognize those events as being more than “things that happened”. If a child can not recognize the harmful effect that the behavior had on others, the child will not be able to feel remorse for that event; even after the development of conscience.

In other words; "Parents, let it Go."

The forth and last principle is; **Parents should acknowledge and rejoice in accomplishments made by the child and forgive the past trespasses of the child without the requirement of the child to express remorse.**

*This principle must be anchored in the parents' acceptance and willingness to*

*forgive the child without stipulations or conditions. The parents also need to hold close to their heart, that the hurts and trauma's they received from the child are actually the price they willingly paid for the child's healing process. AND IT WAS A BARGIN!*

## **The Four Principles of a High Structured Environment**

**1. Purposeful opportunities for the child to make choices must be given and scripted with imposed consequences that reaffirm the good judgment of the choice.**

*This principle must be anchored in the parents' commitment to helping the child heal and the parents' ability to maintain that commitment by being an observer of the child's behavior as opposed to a participant with the child in their pathology.*

**2. The parents must provide love to the child with a peaceful heart. The parents must receive love from a source other than the child.**

*This principle must be anchored in the parents' relationships with others because these children can not, and will not reciprocate love. Parents must have in-place a means to recharge their emotional batteries.*

**3. Parents must allow the child to keep the responsibility of "working on their life" by kindly and firmly holding the child to task, being empathic when they fail and encouraging them as they restart the task.**

*This principle must be anchored in the parents understanding of how huge and deep the child's wounds are: how terrifying it is for the child to address them in therapy and how invasive and completely they are embedded into the child, even at the very cell level.*

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