

Ghosts from the past

by Barbara Burrows

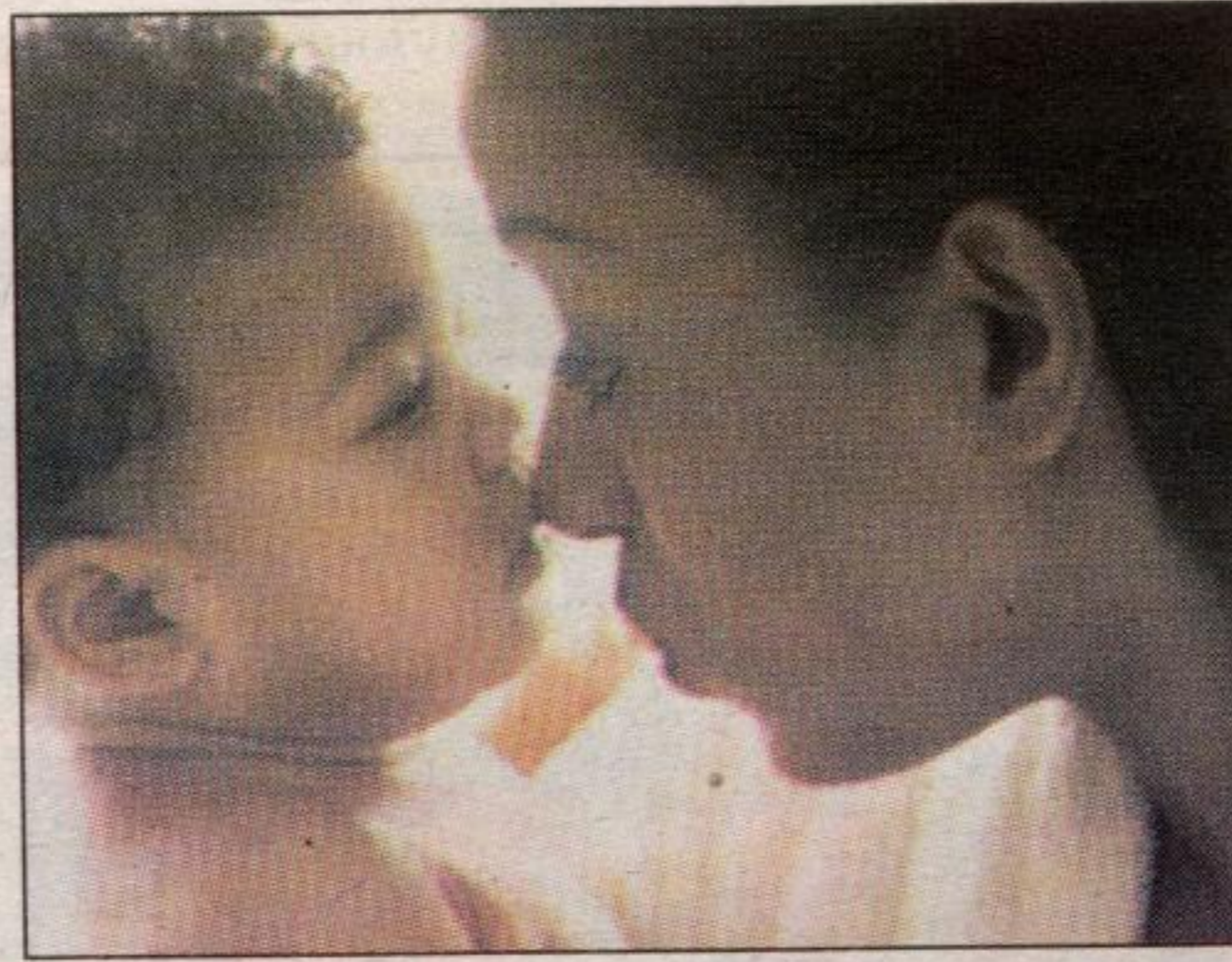
Parenting, more than any other of our relationships, effects us inwardly by stirring our emotions to a new depth. It evokes our unconscious* in new ways. The unconscious is the part of our mind that although unavailable to us, creates powerful impulses that we try to keep under control. Almost all of us, at times, have strange and unintelligible experiences. It can be involuntary movements (tics), an over-whelming or unjustified emotion or mood (anxiety spells or depression), queer impulses or thoughts (obsessions or compulsions), or physical symptoms not related to diagnosed illness (headaches, stomachaches). These symptoms break into our everyday life from an unknown source and disturb our "sanity", and are outside the realm of conscious will. When these pressures "take over", we feel off balance. For almost everyone, these unintelligible experiences increase when we become parents. It is much harder to remain "sane" we might say, with the new emotional demands that parenting creates.

One very common example of this is that most of us have reacted to everyday events with our children with too much anger. Often, what stirs these angry impulses is past experiences in us that have been "repressed". The late Selma Fraiberg, internationally recognized psychoanalyst, discussed these impulses in her famous paper "Ghosts from the Nursery". She spoke of the "ghosts" we carry within, from early experiences, that are re-enacted in certain (often stressful) situations with our children. When past memories remain unconscious, they can create impulses that cause us to act in ways that are beyond conscious control. Most parents know exactly what I mean when I explain this phenomenon.

The following examples show how one mother was able to use her sad experiences from the past to enhance her relationship with her son, and another mother's sad experiences from the past caused her to be impatient and harsh with her children. The second example shows how the unconscious "ghosts" can influence parenting in an unhappy way.

First Example:
A mother with vivid and sad memories of her bleak and deprived childhood

wished to create a happier time for her child. She enjoyed giving her young son toys and playing with him. In watching him play, and playing with him, she felt somewhat healed as she felt she was improving things for the next generation. Because she felt close to her



child and was still connected with her own sad memories, watching him play and playing with him was a little bit like getting a second chance to experience childhood and enjoy, through her son's experience, the things she had longed for but had not experienced. In a way, giving attention and toys to her son was almost like giving them to herself. Both mother and son gained from her ability to give in this way. Because this mother was able to remember and tolerate her own sad memories from the past, she was not threatened by her son's wants and desires.

Second Example

Another mother with a sad and deprived background, learned to cope with denial** and repression***. She tried not to think too much about the things that made her unhappy and the angry feelings associated with many disappointments. As the years passed, she maintained an illusion that her childhood was fine.

When she became a mother, although she could remember that she did not have many toys or attention, she could not clearly remember what it was like not having the things (and the love) she so badly wanted. As a result, it was difficult for her when her children wanted things or demanded that she play with them. When her children asked of her what she wanted from her own parents, but was denied, she became very angry and impatient with them.

If she identified with her children, and was able to remember what it is like to be a child wishing for love and

attention, it would shatter her illusions about her childhood, and her painful memories would come back. To protect herself from becoming aware of these hurtful past memories, she would become irritable with her children, punishing them often and for little reason. Her children became angry with her in return. The reacted to her and did things to make her angry. The anger in her home made her miserable. But it also helped her defend against her painful childhood. Her "ghosts" were interfering with what she most wanted - to raise happy children.

Few "truths" in our lives are as difficult to consider as the possibility that we may be contributing to our children's poor behaviour. And yet, if we are able to consider this possibility, our chances of resolving difficulties with our children are greatly increased.

Every aspect of our children's misbehaviour cannot be contributed to us. When the problem is related to us - our daily tensions, our past - it can be immensely helpful when we figure it out.

There are two things we can do to help us understand a little more about our own "unconscious".

#1 Accessing Memories

Pausing to reflect and trying to pinpoint the moment that the emotion became strongest can sometimes help tremendously in understanding how our past can effect the present. Very often, memories can be accessed with reflection. Accessing sad, angry, resentful, revengeful or hurt feelings is the very thing that allows the healing process to begin. When we 'know', we can often take control of our ghosts.

#2 Using Reflection

Although some memories can never be accessed, pausing to reflect can sometimes help parents get a sense of whether the emotions they are experiencing are "out of proportion" to the child's behaviour. If the parents' response and feelings do not really match the child's "crime" very well, it may be the emotions are connected not only with the child in the present, but also with circumstances stored in the unconscious from the parent's past.

In this case, even attempting to reflect may allow us to recognize that

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Georgetown, Ont. L7G 4B1
Telephone: (905) 873-0301
Fax: (905) 873-0398

E-mail: production@independentfreepress.com

Ken Nugent, Publisher

Steve Foreman, Advertising Manager
John McGhie, Managing Editor
Lorne Drury, Editor-in-Chief
Carol Young, Business Manager
Dave Coleman, Director of Distribution
Nancy Geissler, Circulation Manager

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Founder and Director
Barbara Burrows

Executive Editor
Barbara Burrows

Managing Editor
Angela Greenway

Creative/Production
Michelle Sharp

Barbara Burrows Parenting
3516 Mainway Drive
Burlington, ON L7M 1A8
Phone (905) 335-8803
Fax (905) 332-4611
E-mail: bburrows@home.com
www.barbaraburrows.com

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