

The title of the film, “The Trouble with Evan,” suggests that Evan, an 11-year old, mischievous boy, is single-handedly responsible for creating trouble for his family. However, a closer look at the dynamics of the family and a psychological analysis of its individual members show that the parents also contribute to the problem and that there are deeper issues at play.

Footage of the family’s affairs reveals that they live in a high-stress environment. Much of the reason for this is rooted in each family member’s use of defense mechanisms. Freud first coined the term, “defense mechanism,” to describe the unconscious reaction that protects a person from experiencing unpleasant emotions such as anxiety or guilt (Weiten, 475). Three of the defense mechanisms that Evan’s family employs are regression, displacement, and sublimation. While regression and displacement are typically maladaptive and contribute to exacerbating the problems within the family, sublimation is adaptive and healthier than other alternatives.

Freud explains that regression is at work when the ego, the decision-making component of personality that considers social realities, guards against anxiety by reverting to behaviors reflective of an earlier stage of development that was safer and less stressful (Hock, 238). In the film, Karin explains that previously, her marriage had been marked by verbal and physical abuse, with one instance in which Michael, her husband, held a knife to her throat. This may have triggered violent unconscious impulses towards her husband that the ego blocked with the defense mechanism regression. Instead, she displays irresponsible behavior that one would not expect from a mother with childcare responsibilities. She decides to abandon her family and leave to Mexico for six months. In Mexico, she does not need to deal directly with her marriage and can live a relatively carefree life, which was possible at earlier stages of development. Another example in which Karin displays regression is when Evan runs away from home and she is shown sitting in the kitchen with Michael, crying. The film shows her falling apart, reacting

childishly, and depending on Michael for all of the answers. These are all reactions one would expect from someone at an earlier stage of development. By employing regression, she does not confront her problems directly nor deal with them in a healthful way. Instead, she further harms her relationship with her family and creates distrust in her ability to be a mother. Thus, her use of regression as a defense mechanism is a maladaptive coping strategy (Weiten, 525).

Michael and Evan use displacement as a coping strategy by diverting their anger from the original source to a substitute target (Weiten, 475). At home, Michael continuously verbally and physically abuses Evan. While Evan's id may demand immediate gratification by showing aggression toward his father, his ego mediates this desire by reasoning that it would only result in negative consequences. Therefore, he displaces his hostility on less threatening figures, namely his schoolmates. An example of Evan's displacement of anger begins the film with a teacher's report on Evan's behavior: "[Evan] showed aggressive behavior at snack time... and gouged his fingernails in a classmate leaving a long mark for no apparent reason." (The Trouble With Evan, 1994). At another point, he also receives detention at school for shoving other children. Similarly, Michael appears to hold resentment towards his own father for being so tough and unaffectionate with him when he was younger. Michael recalls that he was his father's "pet" more than his son (The Trouble With Evan, 1994). His hostility and aggression towards Evan can be interpreted as displaced anger from his father, who has since passed away, to Evan. Michael abuses Evan even when Evan has done nothing wrong, and displacement is one explanation for such behavior. Another classic example of displacement Michael displays is when he kicks the dog when he's angry with Evan for taking the check. While the dog did nothing to deserve the hit, Michael kicked the dog instead of Evan. All of these examples of displaced aggression are maladaptive coping strategies because they are harming others that are not the true subject of hostility. It is also maladaptive because it does not involve dealing with

the source of the problem. On the other hand, Evan is avoiding even more unhealthful consequences such as physical abuse from Michael by displacing his anger on weaker and less powerful substitutes.

While regression and displacement are maladaptive coping strategies, sublimation is a “necessary part of a productive and healthy life” (Hock, 238). Sublimation involves finding constructive ways to discharge energy that is the result of socially unacceptable impulses (S. Schreier, PSYCH 111 lecture, March 20, 2008). When Michael abuses Evan, Evan is eerily quiet and compliant, although it is easy to assume that Evan is fighting off aggressive impulses at the moment. He sublimates these impulses by engaging in a contact sport, namely football. In the film, the narrator mentions that he plays little league football. Another example of sublimation is when Evan cooks supper for his family. He is channeling energy into doing something constructive and helpful for his family instead of engaging in other more unacceptable behaviors. These are more adaptive coping methods because they allow him to redirect his aggression in a more healthful way that produces rewards rather than punishment.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is described as enduring psychological disturbance due to a traumatic event or experience (S. Schreier, PSYCH 111 lecture, April 1, 2008). Chronic stress conditions are also now included under what can be labeled a traumatic event. The traumatic stimulus in Evan’s case is the abuse that he receives from his parents. Some of the behavioral symptoms that he displays that supports the presence of this disorder are his blunted emotion, increase in aggressiveness, and avoidance of places associated with the stimuli.

Evan’s numbness and blunted emotion is evident throughout the film. Throughout the film, it’s surprising to see that Evan never cries nor shows an outburst of emotion, although his situation would merit such a response. For instance, when his father throws markers at him, he does not react with any emotion. Even when a cameraman asks him to explain how he feels, he

says that he feels nothing. Although he amends his statement later as he recounts unpleasant memories, he talks about his feelings in a detached way. Another symptom that is apparent in Evan is his increase in aggressiveness. One can assume that his aggressiveness is a response to the stress and abuse that he experiences at home. He is especially aggressive with his schoolmates. The film mentions one incidence when he put his classmate in a headlock during recess and left finger marks on him. While he is not aggressive toward his parents, he uses the defense mechanism of displacement and hurts other students. Evan also avoids his home, which is a place associated with the stimulus. After Evan gets caught in school smoking a stolen cigarette from Michael, he runs away from home. His parents acknowledge that he probably avoided coming home that evening because he knew he was going to be punished. All of these symptoms – aggressiveness, blunted emotion, and avoidance of places associated with the trauma – indicate that Evan could have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (S. Schrier, PSYCH 111 lecture, March 20, 2008).

While Evan receives the focus of attention and his parents receive peripheral attention in the film, Kimberly is largely ignored. Child abuse involves a non-accidental attack on or injury to a child (S. Schrier, PSYCH 111 lecture, March 20, 2008). While she is not abused throughout the film, there are foreboding indicators that she may be abused in the future. Psychologists believe that there are certain child characteristics that can increase or decrease the potential for maltreatment. These characteristics can be categorized as risk factors and protective factors, respectively. Not only are there child characteristics, but also there are family, community and society characteristics that can influence the likelihood of maltreatment for the child (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2004).

A protective factor for Kimberly at this stage is her gender. In contrast to the abuse Michael inflicts on Evan, he adores, coddles, and never abuses Kimberly. The film shows

Michael brushing Kimberly's hair and saying that girls should be treated like princesses. Karin even remarks on Michael's behavior: "Little girls, you're supposed to cuddle and brush their hair a hundred times each night, tickle them..." In contrast, he does not believe that boys should kiss, hug, or show affection. However, this is not to say that Michael's treatment of Kimberly will not change as she gets older. Evidence suggests that gender is predictive of maltreatment risk, with girls being significantly more likely to suffer sexual abuse (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2004). If the way Michael has treated Karin in the past is any indicator, he may shift away from adoring Kimberly to abusing her.

The Child Welfare Information Gateway also states that a parental risk factor for child abuse and neglect is an insecure attachment with his or her own parents. Michael reveals that he never had a close relationship with his father although he deeply desired one, and since his father passed away, it is difficult for him to reconcile this feeling. Karin also reveals that she had a stormy relationship with her own parents. She underwent her parents breaking up and failed at an attempt to live with her father (The Trouble With Evan, 1994). Since Michael's abusive tendencies can be interpreted as displacement of anger towards his father to Evan, it is not difficult to imagine that Kimberly could also be a target one day. Michael and Karin's insecure attachments to their own parents may also indicate that they also grew up with neglect or even abuse. Studies indicate that there is an established link between childhood abuse and becoming a victimizer later in life (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2004).

References

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