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Wake up to the danger of sociopaths

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Children of sociopaths are twice cursed

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Many have declared that the lack of a conscience is the defect that defines sociopathy. Therefore, understanding how the conscience forms will lead us to better understand this disorder. Researchers currently discuss two basic pathways to conscience formation. The first and most common path to conscience is through guilt. Conscience through guilt develops from fear of punishment. Children who are genetically at risk for sociopathy are often fearless and so have little or no guilt, as discussed last week.

The second path to conscience

The second path to conscience is through empathy. A fearless child can have a conscience if he develops empathy. Conscience through empathy is called the "second pathway" or "alternative pathway" by researchers because empathy provides a conscience to fearless, relatively guiltless, people. Most humans have a two part conscience and experience both guilt and empathy.

Just what is empathy?

Empathy is our understanding of the feelings of others, AND a compulsion to treat others kindly based on this understanding. A compulsion is a strong urge— something a person feels he has to do. The compulsion to treat others kindly happens in part because an empathetic person actually feels another's feelings as if they were his own. Thus the

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adage, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" describes a neural reflex.

If you have spent time with a sociopath, you can probably attest to the fact that although sociopaths have some understanding of other's feelings, they lack the compulsion to treat others kindly. Brain imaging studies reveal that the parts of the brain responsible for empathy are smaller and poorly developed in sociopaths. Thus, sociopaths have failed to develop BOTH guilt and empathy. As a child, the sociopath did not travel down either path toward a conscience.

Fearless at-risk children can develop a conscience through empathy

To develop a conscience through empathy, at risk children need large amounts of nurturing attention. An especially close, loving relationship with at least one caregiver is required for empathy to develop. Because at-risk children are also impulsive and very difficult to be with, it is hard to provide them with the nurturing attention they need. Parents who succeed with at risk kids do so because they strike a balance between training impulse control and paying loving positive attention. An excessive focus on "discipline" prevents a parent from providing enough of the nurturing attention needed for empathy to develop.

At risk children are twice cursed twice!

Children of sociopaths are therefore twice cursed. They are at risk to fail to develop both guilt and empathy, one double curse. They are twice cursed again when the same genes that put them at risk, also give them unfit parents. Sociopaths are not capable of providing the nurturing attention at-risk children require. They also model aggressive behavior. In an at-risk child, unchecked aggressive impulses further squelch the development of empathy.

Are you the only healthy parent of an at-risk child?

If you are the only healthy parent of an-risk child, you have the challenge of dealing with

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your child's genetics while minimizing the harmful environmental influences caused by the sociopathic parent. The legal system has failed to protect many at-risk kids from the harm done by parents who are sociopaths. This is especially tragic when there is a relatively healthy parent who is willing and able to provide the love and nurturance the at-risk child needs. The legal system should formally recognize that a child does not need both of his parents if one is a sociopath.

written by [Liane Leedom, M.D.](#) • [Permalink](#) • [Post a Comment](#) »

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