



BY PAUL J. FINK, M.D.

FINK! STILL AT LARGE

The case involving the Colorado family and the balloon hoax raises questions about adults who exploit children. How would you help a child traumatized by such an incident?

The incident involving the boy in the balloon is sure to have triggered a lot of concern among psychiatrists who watched the drama unfold.

In my view, the Heene family's misuse of their child is not so different from the drug pusher who recruits a 10- or 11-year-old runner. In the latter case, the child also is put into serious danger—and the adult disregards the needs and interests of the child.

Reportedly, the father, Richard Heene, is a trained actor, and he wanted a job. So, in order to achieve his goal he knowingly endangered helicopter pilots, police, and many others involved in the search and rescue effort.

One of the most disturbing lessons for the Heene children is that they were made aware that their parents are capable of being less than truthful. Such a lesson might make the boys think that lying is acceptable. After all, many children learn to lie from their parents. "Don't tell your mother" is a common household phrase. Too often, if a child comes home from school and tells mom or dad that they lied, cheated, or hurt another child, the behavior is condoned. This kind of reaction helps the child avoid any pangs of conscience and feel comfortable with psychopathy and sociopathy. At least in the Heene family, the children did not learn that dishonesty pays off.

The Heene family saga also is a reminder of the devastating impact of greed. We have become a nation of cynics, because we expect everyone to cheat. This is expected to such an extent that illegal gains often are worked into the budget, because everyone assumes that someone is bending the rules.

Thirty years ago, I was on my way to New York City to see a show with my wife and 16-year-old son. We got a flat tire, and my son changed the tire while I held an umbrella over his head. The spare was a donut that said on it, "Do not go more than 50 miles on this tire."

So we drove into a Sunoco station to get the flat fixed. I ran into the station, fell, and broke a leg. Instead of going to New York City to see Amadeus, I went to the hospital to be operated on. Two weeks after the incident, I was at home and received a call from a lawyer for the Sun Oil Co. He asked me numerous questions about grease on the ground or my clothes, and I finally said in an exasperated tone: "I ran, I slipped, and I broke my leg. I am not suing you." There was a long silence, and he finally said, "Dr. Fink, this is the most unusual conversation I've had in 15 years of practicing law!" He had expected me to sue. But I saw no reason to sue the company, even though I, like everyone else, could have used the money. It just never occurred to me, and I hope that this lesson in honesty was not lost on my son.

The issue of greed is clearly a big part of the balloon boy case. The parents wanted to find an easy way to make money and get on TV. They used their child, who blew their scheme open with his remark about getting ready for a show.

This is reminiscent of cases in which parents exploit the children's good looks or talents. We were all appalled at clips of JonBenet Ramsey getting dressed up, and dancing and prancing to please her parents. A child exploited in this way might, in fact, learn to enjoy the attention and might learn to adapt his or her attitudes and responses to gain adulation.

Much the same can be said of Michael Jackson, whose father pushed him to become a professional performer as a young child. His talent apparently pleased his father, who Michael complained over the years deprived him of a normal boyhood. Generally, we have not thought of what happened in the Jackson family as abuse. However, I don't see the dynamics as that dif-

ferent. Why, for example, was it so important to immerse Michael and his brothers in show business and make Michael a star? We would all agree that Michael Jackson's father was probably motivated by money. We are back to greed.

If I see in my practice a family in which a child has been exploited for financial gain or some other utility, I try first to assess the degree of trauma in the child.

The most important part of this story is the possible failure of the child to develop a normal superego, a conscience, and a sense of right and wrong consistent with societal norms. The superego is not innate. It is a learned or acquired part of the mental structure, and it is learned from the parents who set the moral tone in the house.

If a mother earns her living by selling illegal drugs, her child might be led to believe that this activity is normal and acceptable. Physical punishment does not help the superego to develop, and parents must know this in order to help their children understand the moral code of the nation, the city, the neighborhood, and the house. If those moral codes are all different, the child becomes confused, because each adult has a different message. Psychiatrists can help parents learn how to parent better and convey consistent moral values so that their children develop a normal superego.

The child has to know when his/her parent is displeased. Knowing when the parent is displeased helps young children to be toilet trained. A gentle, patient tone in the parent's voice during toilet training might teach the child that there is no urgency in getting trained. The message sent to the Heene boys is this: It is fine to create chaos in the community in order to achieve personal goals. The superego will incorporate this lesson most effectively unless there is an early mid-course correction.

Children absorb almost everything they hear in the home. Children sitting at the dinner table walk away with a lot of information, even if they don't truly understand what the information means. Unkind gossip and other talk that violates the supposed moral values of the family are heard and absorbed by children. Saying grace before a meal and then listening to adult conversation that contradicts the moral tone of grace creates a paradox for children. The Heene child was clearly confused by conflicting messages from his parents and he repeated his father's talk about "the show." His articulation of his confusion to the news media blew the cover off the entire hoax.

Getting children to aid and abet criminal behavior is criminal. For the Heene family, capturing the attention of the entire nation was a wish granted. We talked and blogged about the story. Cable television news crews were all over it. Millions offered prayers for the boy we had been led to believe was in the balloon.

The Heene boys, meanwhile, were in on the ruse. They knew what mom and dad were up to, but only the youngest let it slip out because he was not yet a hardened liar.

As we psychiatrists evaluate patients and treat them, we must determine the nature and strength of the superegos.

All of us treat people with depression, which is a disease of the superego characterized by guilt. We saw no guilt in Mr. Heene. Now that he has confessed, we can see his distorted pathological pur-

pose, which was to get an offer to participate in a reality show. We don't know how the father will deal with the child for blowing the hoax with his honesty or naivete. I'm not sure what to call it.

If I were treating this child, I would first get a history of how the children are disciplined and whether they are afraid of their father. That would make a big difference. Children in treatment often identify with their therapist and repeat things that the therapist says to their parents. That could endanger the child and could even end the treatment.

Retraining a child to form a strong and socially acceptable superego is difficult when he or she is living with parents who offer the child conflicting or inappropriate messages about moral values. Their messages are vitally poignant and more powerful than the ideas of the therapist.

Family therapy is a much more acceptable concept if everyone understands that the child's superego is the important subject of the therapy. The Heene family will need a great deal of help to heal the wounds perpetrated by the father. If they are not corrected, family members may grow up as damaged goods. Just as can happen in a family in which the father routinely beats the children, the damage to the children is long-lasting. The father might be deeply hated by those children.

Families like the one I'm describing rarely have family therapy and get a chance to correct the damage. I know of a case in which an 80-year-old man apologized to his 50-year-old son on his deathbed. That is much too late. The balloon boy might tell the story 20 years from now as if it were an adventure and talk about his father with pride. He might never get a mid-course correction to allow his life and his own children to live in a different world where morality is important.

A friend of mine, Wendy Murphy, who is a lawyer and teaches law, also writes op-eds for the Daily Beast and other papers. In a recent op-ed about the Heene family, she closed the piece this way:

"Advertisers know that audiences tune in to reality shows when they can identify with the stars. The Heenes will never attract viewers because among all the moms and dads who sat glued to their television last week, not a single one can relate to people who see value in the criminal exploitation of their own 6-year-old child."

We in psychiatry have to help heal our nation and its moral wounds. This story is a disgrace—and a prime example of the extent to which we get excited by duplicity and criminality.

Fortunately, Richard Heene was among the few who got caught. But that doesn't solve the problem of this child, whom he engaged as a coconspirator. ■

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