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THE CHILD IN YOU

The Breakthrough Method for Bringing Out Your Authentic Self

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STEFANIE STAHL

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THE CHILD IN YOU

CREDIT: ROSWITHA KASTER

Stefanie Stahl is a clinical psychologist and the best-selling author of more than ten books. She has had her own psychotherapy practice in Germany for more than twenty-five years and conducts seminars about self-esteem, love and the fear of commitment. *The Child in You* has sold more than a million copies in Germany, where it was the number one bestselling non-fiction book for three consecutive years, and has been translated into more than twenty languages.

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Translated by Elisabeth Lauffer

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For my friends

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Meditations available for download:

For more intensive work with your inner child, Stefanie Stahl recorded two imaginary journeys: *The Shadow Child Meditation* and *The Sun Child Meditation*. You can download them for free at stefaniestahl.com.

Most of the shadows of this life are caused by standing in one's own sunshine.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

The Child in You

The Child in You Wants to Find a Home

Everybody needs a place where they feel protected, secure, and welcome. Everybody yearns for a place where they can relax and be fully themselves. Ideally, the childhood home was one such place. For those of us who felt accepted and loved by our parents, our home provided this warmth. It was a heartwarming place—the very thing that everybody yearns for. And we internalize this feeling from childhood—that of being accepted and welcome—as a fundamental, positive attitude toward life that accompanies us through adulthood: we feel secure in the world and in our own life. We're self-confident and trusting of others. There's the notion of basic trust, which is like a home within ourselves, providing us with internal support and protection.

Many people, however, associate their childhood with

largely negative experiences, some even traumatic. Others had an unhappy childhood, but have repressed those memories. They can barely recall what happened. Then there are those who believe their childhood was "normal" or even "happy," only to discover, upon closer examination, that they have been deluding themselves. And though people may attempt to repress or, as an adult, downplay childhood experiences of insecurity or rejection, there are moments in everyday life that will reveal how underdeveloped their basic trust remains. They have self-esteem issues and frequently doubt that they are welcome and that their coworkers, romantic partner, boss, or new friend truly likes them. They don't really like themselves all that much, they have a range of insecurities, and they often struggle in relationships. Unable to develop basic trust, they therefore lack a sense of internal support. Instead, they hope that others will provide them with these feelings of security, protection, stability, and home. They search for home with their partner, their colleagues, in their softball league, or online, only to be disappointed: other people can provide this feeling of home sporadically at best. Those who lack a home on the inside will never find one on the outside. They can't tell that they're caught in a trap.

When we talk about these childhood influences—which, along with our genetic makeup, largely define our character and self-esteem—we are discussing a part of our personality referred to in psychology as the "inner child." In other words,

the inner child represents the sum of impressions made on us as children—the good and the bad, experienced through our parents and other important figures. We don't consciously remember most of these experiences. They are, however, permanently etched on our unconscious mind. It's safe to say that the inner child is a significant part of the unconscious. It's the fears, concerns, and adversities we have experienced from the cradle onward. On the other hand, it also represents all the positive influences from our youth.

The negative influences are what primarily plague us as adults. After all, the child within us works hard not to relive the humiliations and injuries it suffered during childhood. At the same time, this child still yearns for the feelings of security and approval that came up short back then. These fears and desires are active in the recesses of our consciousness. On the conscious level, we are independent adults living our lives. On the unconscious level, however, our inner child exercises significant sway over our perception, behavior, and ways of feeling and thinking. It's far stronger than our intellect, in fact. It has been scientifically proven that the unconscious is an incredibly powerful mental force that steers upward of 80 to 90 percent of our experiences and actions.

An example to illustrate: Michael loses his temper every time his partner, Sarah, forgets something that's important to him. She recently forgot to buy his favorite kind of chips while grocery shopping, and he completely flipped out. Sarah was

stunned—to her, it was just a bag of chips. To Michael, meanwhile, it was as if the world were ending. What was going on?

Michael doesn't realize that it's his inner child that feels disregarded and disrespected when Sarah forgets something important to him, even if that's just a bag of chips. He doesn't know that the reason for his rage isn't Sarah and the forgotten snack, but rather a deep wound from the past: namely the fact that his mother did not take his wishes seriously when he was a child. With her shopping mistake, Sarah unwittingly poured salt in this old wound. Since Michael doesn't see the connection between his reaction toward Sarah and his experiences with his mother, however, his own influence over his feelings and behavior is limited. The fight about chips isn't an isolated event. Michael and Sarah fight frequently about mundane things, because neither is aware of what their disagreements are *truly* about, and because—like Michael—Sarah is governed by her inner child. Her inner child is sensitive to criticism, because when she was young, she could rarely do anything right for her parents. As a result, Michael's outbursts trigger old childhood feelings in Sarah, making her feel small and worthless, irritated and offended. Sometimes Michael and Sarah even think it would be better to split up, because they bicker so frequently and hurt each other so deeply.

If each were attuned to what their inner child desired and the pain it felt, though, Michael and Sarah could share these insights rather than fighting superficially about a forgotten bag of chips

or an overly critical remark. They would certainly get along much better, growing closer instead of attacking one another.

That said, ignorance of the inner child doesn't cause conflict only in romantic relationships. Whenever we're aware of the backstory, it's plain that most disagreements aren't two self-possessed adults collaborating to solve a problem; instead, it's two inner children duking it out. For example, when an employee responds to the boss's criticism by quitting. Or when one government reacts with military force to another state's border violation. Ignorance of the inner child causes many people great unhappiness with themselves and their lives, and allows interpersonal conflicts to arise and often escalate uncontrollably.

This is not to say that people who had a happy childhood and gained basic trust are just strolling through life without a care or problem in the world. Their inner child has also sustained certain injuries, because there is no such thing as perfect parents or a perfect childhood. In addition to the positive influences gained from their parents, these people have also inherited difficult traits that can cause problems later in life. These issues may not be as obvious as Michael's outbursts. Perhaps they struggle to trust people outside the family, or dislike making big decisions. Maybe they would rather play it safe than go out on a limb. Whatever the case may be, negative influences from childhood limit us, hindering both our personal development and our relationships.

Ultimately, this applies to most people: only once we have met and befriended our inner child will we come to recognize the deep desires and scars we carry within ourselves. Only then can we accept this part of our soul, and even begin to heal to a certain degree. As a result, our self-esteem can grow, and the child within us will finally find a home. This is the prerequisite for forming friendlier, happier, and more tranquil relationships. It is also the prerequisite for leaving relationships that are bad for us or even make us sick.

This book aims to help you meet your inner child and become friends with it. It will help you shed the old patterns that always lead to dead ends and hard times. It will show you how to acquire helpful new attitudes and behaviors instead, which you can then use to build a much happier life and relationships.

Models of Our Personality

On the surface of our consciousness, our problems often appear complicated and difficult to solve. It can also be hard for us to understand other people's behaviors and feelings. We lack the proper perspective, whether on ourselves or others. The human psyche, however, isn't actually that complicated a structure. Simply stated, it is possible to divide the psyche into various parts: there are the childish parts and the adult parts, the conscious levels and the unconscious levels. When you become familiar with this personality structure, it becomes possible to work with it and solve many of the issues that once appeared insurmountable. In this book, I intend to explain how this is done.

As I wrote earlier, the inner child is a metaphor for the unconscious parts of our personality that were defined in our

childhood. Our emotional life is attributed to the inner child: our fear, pain, grief, and anger, but also our joy, happiness, and love. Parts of the inner child are thus positive and happy, together with those parts that are negative and sad. We aim to become better acquainted and work with both in this book.

Then there's the adult-self, which can also be called the "inner adult." This mental entity encompasses our rational and reasonable mind—in other words, our thinking. Operating as our adult-self, we may assume responsibility, plan, act in anticipation of eventualities, recognize and understand connections, weigh risks, and also regulate the child-self, or inner child. The adult-self behaves consciously and intentionally.

As it happens, Sigmund Freud was the first to divide the personality into different parts. What is referred to in modern psychology as the inner child or child-self, Freud termed the "id." Freud named the adult-self the "ego." He went on to describe the "super-ego," which serves as a sort of moral entity within us and is known in modern psychology as the parental-self or inner critic. When our inner critic is active, we might say to ourselves, "Don't be so stupid! You're worthless and can't do anything right. There's no *way* you can pull this off."

Modern therapy approaches, such as schema therapy, divide the three main selves—child, adult, and parent—into further submodes, such as the hurt, happy, or angry inner child, or the punitive or sympathetic inner parent. Famous German psychologist Friedemann Schulz von Thun (1944–) has gone so

far as to coin the term "inner team" to describe the wide range of subpersonalities found within any given person.

I, on the other hand, would like to keep things as simple and pragmatic as possible. Things quickly become unwieldy and stressful when attempting to manage too many inner modes at once. I will therefore limit myself in this book to the happy inner child, the hurt inner child, and the inner adult. In my experience, these three modes are more than sufficient for solving our problems. I am, however, replacing the terms "happy inner child" and "hurt inner child" with "sun child" and "shadow child," which are much catchier and nicer-sounding.

The sun child and the shadow child are both expressions of the part of our personality referred to as the inner child, which stands for our unconscious. Strictly speaking, only *one* unconscious—that is, *one* inner child—exists. What's more, it isn't always an unconscious feeling. As soon as we start working with the inner child, the feeling becomes conscious. On the other hand, the sun child and the shadow child also represent different states of consciousness. This differentiation is largely pragmatic rather than scientific. In my many years working as a psychotherapist, I have developed a system for solving problems that draws upon the metaphors of the sun child and the shadow child, and that you can use to resolve almost any issue. The qualifier "almost" refers to those problems that lie *outside your control.* Among these are illness, the death of a loved one, war, natural disasters, violent crimes, and sexual abuse. It's

worth noting, however, that a person's personality will inform their ability to overcome these awful twists of fate. Those who were already at odds with their shadow child will naturally struggle more than those with a sun child's disposition. In this sense, people whose main problem stems from a tragic incident also have something to gain from this book. Those who will profit most, however, are people whose problems are "home-made." These problems are found largely within the realm of personal responsibility and include relationship issues, depressed moods, stress, fear of the future, apathy, panic attacks, compulsive behaviors, and so on. These are the problems, after all, that can ultimately be traced back to the impact of our shadow child—or, in other words, back to our sense of self-worth.

The Shadow Child and the Sun Child

How we feel and the feelings we are able to perceive (or rather, those that come up short) all hinge on our innate temperament and childhood experiences. Our unconscious *beliefs* play an important role here. In psychology, a belief is a deeply held conviction that expresses an attitude toward ourselves or our interpersonal relationships. Many beliefs emerge from interactions between the child and its caretakers in the first years of the child's life. For instance, an inner belief could be "I'm okay" or "I'm not okay." Over the course of our childhood and throughout our life, we will internalize both positive and negative beliefs. Positive beliefs such as "I'm okay" developed in situations in which we felt accepted and loved by the people we were closest to. They strengthen us. Negative beliefs such as "I'm not okay," on the other hand,

grew out of situations in which we felt out of place and rejected. They weaken us.

The *shadow child* encompasses our negative beliefs and the associated oppressive feelings of grief, fear, helplessness, or anger. These give rise to defense mechanisms, or self-protection strategies, which we develop to deal with these feelings—or better yet, to avoid feeling them at all. Common self-protection strategies include withdrawal, keeping the peace, perfectionism, aggression and attack, or vying for power or control. I'll be going into much greater detail about beliefs, feelings, and self-protection strategies. At this point, all you need to understand is that the shadow child stands for that part of our self-esteem that is injured and unstable.

The *sun child*, on the other hand, embodies our positive influences and feelings. It epitomizes the happy child in its spontaneity, adventurousness, curiosity, abandon, vitality, drive, and zest for life. The sun child is a metaphor for the part of our self-esteem that remains intact. Even people carrying a lot of childhood baggage have healthy parts of their personality and experience situations in which they don't overreact. They also feel happy, curious, and playful at times—that is to say, times when the sun child is present. Nevertheless, the sun child appears far too seldom in people who had a dark childhood. In this book, we will therefore work especially hard at encouraging the sun child, while comforting the shadow child so that it

can relax, knowing it has been seen and allowing it to make room for its sunny counterpart.

It should be quite clear at this point that it's the shadow child part of our psyche that always causes us problems, especially when we are unaware of it and have therefore never reflected on it. I would like to illustrate this point by returning to Michael and Sarah. When Michael views his behavior through the eyes of his adult-self, it's clear to him that he frequently overreacts. He has often tried to manage his temper. Sometimes he even succeeds—but usually not. Michael's success is limited because his inner adult—his conscious, thinking mind—isn't aware of the scars his shadow child bears. The inner adult therefore has no influence over the shadow child. His conscious, thinking, reasonable mind has no control over his feelings or his behavior, both of which are governed by the shadow child.

If Michael wanted to manage his temper successfully, he would have to gain awareness of the connection between Sarah's behavior and the childhood wounds inflicted upon him by his mother. He would have to reflect upon the fact that his shadow child has a lifelong wound that always flares up when the shadow child feels his wishes aren't being respected. Whenever this happens, his inner adult could console the inner child by saying something along the lines of, "Now, listen, just because Sarah forgot your favorite chips doesn't mean she doesn't love you or take your wishes seriously. Sarah isn't Mom. And

just like you, Sarah isn't perfect. That means she might forget things sometimes, and she's allowed to, even when the thing she forgets just happens to be the chips you like!" By separating his shadow child from the adult part of himself, Michael would not have seen the forgotten chips as a sign that Sarah didn't love or respect him. Instead, he would have seen the incident for the honest mistake that it was. By making this small correction to his perception, he wouldn't have gotten angry in the first place. If Michael truly wishes to get his anger under control, he'll have to direct his attention to his shadow child and its scars. And he must learn to shift consciously into the mode of the benevolent, calm adult-self, which will react in a measured and loving way to the shadow child's impulses instead of subjecting Sarah to its temper tantrums.

How Our Inner Child Develops

The sun child and the shadow child parts of our personality are primarily, if not exclusively, influenced by our first six years of life. The first years of life are so important in human development because during this period, the brain structure, with its neuronal networks and pathways, takes form. The experiences we have with our caretakers during this developmental phase therefore make a lasting imprint on our minds. The way Mommy and Daddy treat us becomes the blueprint for every relationship in our lives. Our connection to our parents teaches us how to regard ourselves and our interpersonal relationships. Our self-esteem emerges in these first years, accompanied by our sense of trust or, in less fortunate cases, our mistrust of other people and relationships.

It's important not to view these things in black and white,

though. After all, there isn't any parent-child relationship that is all good or all bad. Even if we had a good childhood, part of us still carries scars from that time. This can be traced back to the very nature of childhood: we enter the world small, naked, and utterly defenseless. It is a matter of survival that an infant find a caretaker; otherwise, the baby will die. For a long time following birth, we are wholly subordinate and dependent on others. It's why each of us has a shadow child that feels inferior and small and thinks it isn't okay. Besides, not even the most loving parents can fulfill all the child's wishes. They need to draw boundaries and impose rules, especially during the second year of life, at which point the infant has become a toddler and begun to walk. The child is constantly reprimanded: *don't break your toy*, *don't touch that vase*, *don't play with your food*, *just try to go potty*, *be careful!* and so on. In other words, the child regularly gets the sense that they're doing something wrong, something "not okay."

Beside these feelings of inferiority, however, most people also exhibit inner states in which they feel "okay" and valuable. After all, childhood wasn't all bad, but also had good aspects, such as affection, security, play, fun, and joy. It's why we exhibit the part of ourselves called the sun child.

The situation for the (real) child becomes difficult when their parents are inherently ill-equipped to raise and provide for a child and resort to verbal or physical abuse, or neglect.

Small children are unable to judge whether their parents' behavior is good or bad. From a child's perspective, their parents are big and infallible. If Daddy yells at or even strikes his child, the little one won't think, "Daddy is unable to manage his aggression and needs to undergo psychotherapy." Instead, she associates the beating with her own "badness." Before the child has acquired language, she cannot yet even think of herself as being bad, but she senses that she is being punished, and therefore must be bad, or at least wrong.

Generally speaking, the feelings we experience in the first two years of life show us whether we are fundamentally welcome here or not. Caring for infants and toddlers is largely physical: feeding, bathing, swaddling—and, importantly, caressing. Children learn whether they are welcome in this world through the caresses, loving looks, and vocal register of their caretaker. Since we are completely at the mercy of our parents' behaviors in these first two years, it is also during this time that basic trust—or basic mistrust, as the case may be—develops. The qualifier "basic" indicates that this is a profound, existential experience. These experiences create a deep imprint on body memory. In the depths of their consciousness, people who have developed basic trust also have trust in themselves, the fundamental prerequisite for trusting others. Those who never attained basic trust, meanwhile, feel deeply insecure and meet other people with suspicion. People who developed basic trust

frequently find themselves channeling their sun child. If this trust was never acquired, however, the shadow child will come to occupy a lot of space.

Neurological studies have now shown that young children who experience a lot of toxic stress—for instance, those who are mistreated in some way—will release higher levels of stress hormones throughout their life. This makes them more susceptible to stress as adults: they respond more extremely and with greater sensitivity to stressors, and they are mentally less resilient than people whose childhoods were defined primarily by security and nurturing. Expressed in terms of our imagery, this first group of people largely identifies with their shadow child.

The other formative years are also very important and influential, of course. People other than our parents help shape us, too, such as grandparents, fellow students, or teachers. I have limited myself to the influence of parents (or primary guardians) in this book, because it would otherwise go on too long, but if your experiences with peers, a teacher, or your grandma were especially important to you, you may use them as the focus for any of the exercises in this book.

We are unable to remember the first two years of life with our conscious mind—that is, the adult-self—despite the deep imprint these years have made on our unconscious. Most people's first memories start around kindergarten age, or later. From this point in time onward, we can remember how Mommy and Daddy treated us, and what our relationship with them was like.