

Breaking Ineffective Patterns

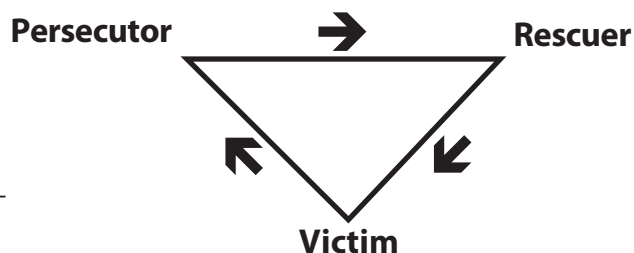
Part of parenting is preparing children to take responsibility for themselves. In the beginning, you know your newborn can't get food, stay clean or calm herself on her own, so you do it for her. You do, however, expect her to be able to do all those things for herself by the time she's a young adult. You have all those years to gradually transfer the responsibility to her. Usually the process goes fairly smoothly, but sometimes parents can get stuck in patterns that undermine their effectiveness and confuse their children.

Victim, Persecutor, Rescuer

At first, parents willingly look after the needs of their infant. But when the child gets older, they can start to feel like the victim of those needs. One day, under pressure, they explode and become the persecutor. It's as if they're angry at the child for being so demanding. Then, being caring parents at heart, they feel guilty for losing patience. To compensate, they become a friendly rescuer, ready to take on the full job and more. But soon they start feeling like a victim again, and the exhausting cycle repeats itself.

Here's an example. When your child starts school, you start making school lunches for him. After several years, this becomes part of your routine. Maybe by the time your son is nine, you begin to think he's old enough to make his own lunch, but in the end it's faster to do it yourself. Then one busy morning, you slap together a sandwich and he says, "I don't want to eat *that* again." His remark sets off the bomb of resentment that had been ticking away: "Well then, you can make your *own* lunch from now on!" But he's never learned how and there's no time now, so he leaves with a half-empty lunch bag. At noon you start feeling guilty about being so harsh. So on the way home, you pick up some of his favourite cookies for the next day's lunch. You don't ask him to make his lunches after all... until the next time you feel overloaded and explode again.

This is the triangle that many parents travel when they do things for their children that the children are now able to do for themselves.¹



Getting off the triangle

The clue to getting off the triangle is to realize that children don't learn a complicated task all at once. You

can help them succeed by breaking each job into small, manageable parts. Then you can move along the skill building line:

**demonstrate → help/teach →
remind/coach → act as a consultant**

Let's take school lunches as an example:

- **demonstrate** - At first, let him watch you make his sandwich.
- **help/teach** - Let him put the sandwich into the lunch bag and choose a fruit; later, he can make the sandwich from the ingredients you set out.
- **remind/coach** - Now he's able to take over more of the job, limit your part to a few reminders and occasional questions that coach him to make healthy choices.
- **act as a consultant** - Consultants provide useful information, based on their experience: "A ripe peach is best placed in a container before going in the lunch bag."

Long-term results

This skill building process can be applied to a wide variety of situations. It takes more time than just doing the job yourself, and you will have to accept that results will not be perfect at first. However, over the long term, you end up with more capable, confident children and a more relaxed and harmonious relationship.

Which responsibilities?

If you find yourself on the Victim-Persecutor-Rescuer triangle, ask yourself what skills you need to teach your children so that they can take responsibility for themselves. The particular responsibilities you choose to transfer will depend on a number of factors:

- **your family's values** - What do *you* think it is important for your children to learn to do for themselves?
- **the way you organize your household** - School lunches are just an example. In your family, it might work best if one person does all the lunches. You can choose other jobs for your children to take on.
- **your child's abilities** - Each child is unique. Build on their strengths when deciding what jobs to give them and at what age.
- **realistic expectations** - You may find yourself overwhelmed by your children's needs when they are still too young to fill those needs for themselves. Be realistic. Don't try to shift responsibilities to them too early. Ask for help from other adults.

by Betsy Mann

¹ Transactional analyst Stephen Karpman called this the "drama triangle." You can read more about it in *Scripts People Live* by Claude Steiner and *Born To Win* by Muriel James.