Our society includes a large and increasing population segment of children slipping through the cracks. SHADOW CHILDREN are now identifiably at-risk and they come from all walks of life. They earn the title of SHADOW CHILDREN because they are hiding – some quietly unnoticed, some obviously disregarded and dismissed, and some hidden in plain sight. Shadow Children, as such, often go unnoticed in their own homes and schools…until it is too late.

My purpose in this article is to illuminate these children with your awareness so that they CAN be noticed, assessed and helped. If you are reading this across the table from your child eating breakfast you may have suspected that something was amiss. If you are a teacher, you may have students you suspected were discouraged about school and life. But you may not have. The objective is to know. No parent or teacher loses a child without incredible pain and suffering. The loss may come in a myriad of forms - suicide, alcohol/drugs, running away, compulsivity or, the most common loss: failing to have a successful life.

The Shadow Child Syndrome (a grouping of characteristics) can be found in rich kids, poor kids and middle-class America. It sounds like all children could be at-risk. They could! In our program at Marian College, three of the core courses for a generic graduate degree are in at-risk education for mainstream teachers. Over 25% of their Master's program hours are in at-risk education as a way of acknowledging the fact that Shadow Children show up every where. Oh, you can have a concentration in an alternative program or even in a charter school within a school district, but these programs usually house only about 10% (at best) of the total at-risk population. And on any given day, due to external events, any child could temporarily drop into Shadow Child symptomologies. Temporary inclusion in this category can be fatal, e.g. suicide. It happens 5 times a day in America to mostly boys: mostly Caucasian, and mostly not living in poverty. I raised two boys by myself. I shudder to think how easily this could have happened to either of them…and only afterwards would I have seen through the glass darkly. Too late. You snooze…you lose. Today there is more reason to hope! We are beginning to notice patterns in these children that make them identifiable earlier and earlier.

One of the fascinating things, and damnably frustrating things, about human beings is that they keep things hidden. Some kids are obviously Shadow Children. These kids are sometimes so obvious that they can be spotted by teachers of primary school years long before the child has the capability to fulfill the prophecy to come. Other Shadow Children, as mentioned previously, are hidden in plain sight. They have learned "how to play the game" of being inconspicuous. Social acceptance is huge in a child's life…just like yours and mine. No one wants to be "the odd ball" or "weirdo" in their existing social system. Staying under the radar as a goal is more common in Shadow Children than in any other group.

An adult whether parent, teacher, or other influential person who knows the symptoms stands a good chance of making a difference in an at-risk child's life. These children, whether they show it or not, hunger for a champion, and need a knowledgeable one.
Is Your Child or Student a Shadow Child?

Shadow Children have eight "symptom categories." The more issues they have with the eight symptoms the more they move into the shadowy end of the "at-risk continuum." What does this mean? A Shadow Child, by definition, has substantially diminished chances of success. Since "school" is all about increasing your chances of success, you would think that indications of failure alone in children would send up a flag that the school was falling down. Not usually. Ignoring the at-risk population of Shadow Children is one of the most shameful things education as an institution has ever done. I can almost forgive parents (including myself) as we had our children in a little bubble called "the family" and we compared against each other. Schools have a much easier job of diagnosing as they have a whole population to compare against. The truth is, more often than not, schools dread, shun, exclude, and push out Shadow Children rather than help them.

Only a law (e.g., NCLB) forces schools to perform, and they often look for ways around the law rather than doing the right thing and addressing Shadow Children's needs. It is the height of ridiculousness! It is no different than a medical doctor surreptitiously shoving ill patients out the back door because they are not healthy. One of our major tasks as educators – representatives of that concept called school – is to spot trouble and address it WITH the child. We do not spot trouble well, nor do we know what to do to effectively address it. We do not know what we need to know.

The Origin of Shadow Children

Where do Shadow Children come from? Dysfunctional families. Mostly. Simple as that. Did I say a "poor family"? No, I said "dysfunctional."

What is a dysfunctional family? In 1995 Steven Farmer and I collaborated to define a dysfunctional family as having eight characteristics. The cut-to-the-chase definition of a dysfunctional family is that it is a family – regardless of income level – that abuses and/or neglects its children such that they grow up with substantial deficiencies in "life skills." If you thought of the essential life skills "tool box" that we all need to ‘make it’ in this world, a child leaving a dysfunctional family would have a tool box with many vacant slots and maybe even empty trays. Rich parents neglect their children as much as poor ones. Rich ones just have the money to hire various "tutors" to compensate for the parent as teacher of life skills. Sometimes they hire a whole school – a private school or ‘academy’. A dysfunctional family is not always malevolent. Only a small percentage of the time is the dysfunction expressed in beating, whipping, slapping, or sex abuse. Make no mistake, families dispensing that kind of treatment on a regular basis are, as a result, dispensing Shadow Children at the end of the "family as assembly line." More often, however, the key dysfunctional issue is about absence (aka “neglect”). It is about the absence of loving the child enough to teach the child healthy limits and boundaries in a positive nurturing way. It is about giving the child cherishing priority and having and/or taking and/or making the time to nurture. Or, as often, the dysfunction is about the absence of knowledge on the parent's part as to what ARE the life skills needing to be taught. We now have multiple generations of dysfunctional family survivors.
having children with the parents' tool boxes showing vacancies. Parents often parent the way they were parented.

People knowingly nod when they hear the old expression "it takes a village to raise a child" but a nod and comprehension may be two different things. Most people do "get it" that raising a child to a successful adulthood is a time consuming, pretty much full-time, job. A good way to know the next time that you nod at that phrase that you are one of the people who truly gets it, do this.

Think of all the life skills you currently have…that you may even take for granted. Mathematical functions of adding, subtracting, percentages, and writing, reading and other literacy skills. More importantly think of bigger categories, and what it takes to do well in life when utilizing them:

- Making good decisions
- Solving problems well
- Social skills with a stranger, friend, lover, authority figure, colleague, etc.
- Communication skills such as body language, inflection, tonality…word nuances, etc.
- Admirable work skills
- Handling money well
- Safely driving a vehicle
- Using a computer well
- Healthy nutrition and exercise
- Raising a healthy family
- Prioritizing and meeting your needs without hurting others
- Pursuing a goal effectively
- Knowing yourself as in Socrates “Know thyself”

Now, I hand you a baby and I mandate that you, "Teach this child all these things to a high degree of efficiency and effectiveness, taking into account that 80+% of the jobs that will be available to this child in 22 years currently do not exist!" Time to call the Village Council, right? This is more than one person can handle. But it happens! Only half the children in America are born into a family where both biological parents are married (to each other). Single parents keeping kids at home due to home schooling preferences was an extreme example, but now becoming more and more common, where the parent must teach EVERYTHING to the child. How well can one parent do it?

And it is more than teaching. Wealthy dual parent homes send their children to the best schools, with tutoring if needed, music lessons, summer opportunities for mind and social expansion, and the child can still turn out to be a detriment to self and society. The odds are narrowed, but it still happens.

Why? Because the child is missing out on Cherishing (love) and Nurturing (health), the foundation of a healthy, productive and more or less contented future adult.

_The SHADOW CHILD SYNDROME_
How can that primary school teacher know a child is going to be at-risk? They will tell you they "just know." But when you press them, as I have, you hear all their descriptors coming out in eight categories. In the book, \textit{SHADOW CHILDREN ~ Understanding Education's #1 Problem}, I detail these eight symptomatic categories. Here, with the reminder not to go off half-cocked and overreact every time you see one of these in your child, I lay them out for you with brief definitions.

1) \textbf{CONTROL CONSCIOUSNESS}
Growing up in unstable and unpredictable environments creates chaotic inner feelings and uncertainty. One learns to be watchful and cautious in order to survive. One learns to control emotions, thoughts and behaviors through suppression and denial, hoping that this will help control the self, others and the world. OR just the opposite! The Shadow Child has NO control. It has turned control over to someone else and asks how high on the way up when told to "Jump!" Their thoughts and feelings are chaotic, and therefore behaviors are often overly spontaneous and whimsical. People with an excessive loss of control wind up institutionalized...or dead.

2) \textbf{AVOIDING EMOTIONS}
The dysfunctional training that children receive instills a denial of what is felt: "Don't trust any of your emotions to benefit you and ignore what your senses tell you." When adults in the dysfunctional home showed emotion it was often associated with abusive situations, and children assume a direct cause and effect relationship. The message is, "Don't trust others and their emotions, and don't trust your own emotions either." Yet, human beings are emotional beings if they are anything, so what does the survivor do with those feelings? Like the shark, they eat them. In Freudian terminology, they repress and suppress them. \textit{Repression} is subconscious denial, meaning the feelings are buried before they come to conscious awareness. \textit{Suppression} is burying feelings consciously: "How will it look if I laugh? Better not to." Right. Sometimes it IS the proper thing to do. One does not laugh at a funeral. Or scream in a library. Dysfunctional suppression is stuffing legitimate feelings and their expression. One becomes what we call "impassive" all the time. OR just the opposite! See "emotional look-alikes" in #8 below, Compulsive Behaviors.

3) \textbf{INABILITY TO GRIEVE TO COMPLETION}
Especially noteworthy in dysfunctional family survivors is the inability to grieve losses to completion. The "tunnel of grief" has four sequential stations: 1) shock & denial; 2) anger and/or fear/bargaining; 3) sadness; and, 4) acceptance and/or gratitude. Inability to grieve means that with each need-to-let-go situation one gets "stuck" in one of the stations and never reaches the stage at the end of the tunnel, acceptance. Changes are constant in life. With each change usually comes a death, whether it is leaving the first grade for the second, quitting cigarettes, letting go of one's youth, quitting a relationship, or leaving home. Inability to grieve to completion means that there are many Shadow Children in perpetual states of shock, denial, anger, fear, and/or sadness. I have always suspected that Shadow Children are perpetually sad, usually repressed, because they are feeling the loss of a functional family...that cherishing and nurturing that they are genetically hard-wired at birth to expect and accept.
4) Guilt from Overresponsibility
The guilt carried in the dysfunctional family survivor core stems from the child feeling overly responsible for their caretakers' actions and feelings. The Shadow Child may even feel guilty for the abuse suffered, and perhaps for any punishment that his/her siblings received. Shadow Children carry to school and into eventual adulthood the habitual and overwhelming pattern of feeling the need to be a caretaker of others. Whether they do it or not is another thing, but they if they do not act it out then they will act it in. This means that they will internalize the lack of action as feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Either way, no matter how much caretaking they actually do or don't do, it will never be enough. That is because this is compulsive behavior, and with compulsive behavior: If what you want is not what you need, it will never be enough. –Janet Woititz (in seminar, Holiday Inn West, Madison, WI – February 13, 1990).

5) Crisis Addiction
Inconsistencies, surprises, and terror perhaps were the norm in the childhood of Shadow Children, so when things are calm and stable Shadow Children may feel deadened or bored, thereby necessitating an urge to stir things up. Although they may complain outwardly about chaos, inwardly Shadow Children may be agitated deep inside when it is not present. Some Shadow Children develop an excitement addiction, and will generate an uproar game if things are too serene. Often this appears as sabotage in school, business or relationships. They just can't stand success might be a phrase that sometimes applies to Shadow Children. If this is so, then it is a direct challenge to education. Education is in the success business and Shadow Children are the litmus test for how well we are doing. 30% failure to complete high school ratios might tell us we are not doing so well. 70% was a 'D' when I was teaching in a public high school.

6) Guessing at Normality
What is normal? Because the nature of life in most Shadow Children's homes was extreme no standards were established for the concept of normalcy. When I use the word 'extreme' I am reminding us all that there are two sides to the extremism coin. From a psychological standpoint, hurtling things through windows in rage and or exhibiting no reaction at all to an enraging moment are equally extreme. As they grow, Shadow Children are constantly confused as to what is really healthy and normal. They frequently feel unsure inside their heads although they may have complex strategies to portray themselves otherwise with their bodies. "Fitting in" is a powerful social drive, with the penalty for not doing so invites being distanced and labeled 'strange.' On their journey to becoming adults a constant pressure is felt by Shadow Children as to what is proper behavior. They lack a solid internal guidance system as to what is appropriate and must therefore be constantly codependent upon others for feedback in order to make proper outward adjustments necessary for fitting in. They can never relax.

7) Low Self-Esteem
Being abused and neglected delivers the constant message, You are not good enough the way you are. When self-adjusting brings the same response again, one perceives that the TRUTH is that no matter what I do, I am not going to be good enough. Thus the core of shame overshadows the pristine self and Shadow Children regard themselves as defective or irretrievably damaged, i.e., inferior. It is impossible to develop a benevolent self-concept in this soil. Shadow Children find many ways to reaffirm the belief that they are, indeed, always "less than" in thoughts, words, and
It is this self-validating internalized assumption that delivers the crucifying mandates by which SC often shape their lives. One of the saddest things in the world to see is a perfectly good person self-destruct.

8) **COMPULSIVE BEHAVIORS**

One of the earliest evaluative scales we all learned as infants was pain vs. pleasure. Human beings avoid pain and seek pleasure. The psychological pain of being alienated from the true self is one of the most intense, confusing and enduring possible. It resembles an incurable migraine of the soul. Compulsive behavior of any sort offers an irresistible anesthesia for the psychological pain plus a pleasant diversion for the body. One can be compulsive about almost anything: alcohol and other drugs; work; gambling; food; shopping; hoarding; sex; exercise; relationships; religion; particular emotion look-alikes (rageaholism, sadaholism, phobias); power; money; worry; violence; etc., ad infinitum. We all have our favorite things to do when emotionally overwrought. My grandfather swept the floor, sometimes 10 times a day! I went through a period of nail-biting as a teen. Overeating is now common that tobacco is steadily being extinguished from our society as an acceptable way to relieve stress. The compulsivity with Shadow Children is magnified beyond these socially acceptable avenues. They DO smoke earlier, have sex sooner, create violence (outside) or inside (suicide) as children, worry constantly, or become like Jimmy B in my high school, had 16 varsity letters when he graduated. Human doings rather than human beings.

So, now we can look at the list of Shadow Children universal characteristics. Is this list exclusive? No, of course not, but these are the PREVAILING categories likely to raise their obsessive heads in most Shadow Children at some period of their lives. How to overcome these handcuffing symptoms is yet another issue, but first let us look at the list again, now with more insight:

In summary, **SHADOW CHILDREN** have developmentally inhibiting issues due to being trapped in a series of no-win continua:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Continuum</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SELF-CONTROL</td>
<td>(hyper-alert &lt;=&gt; loose cannon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABNORMAL EMOTIONAL RESPONSE</td>
<td>(outwardly excessive &lt;=&gt; inwardly repressive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STUCK IN SHOCK/ANGER/SADNESS</td>
<td>(bewildered &lt;=&gt; rage &lt;=&gt; melancholy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXCESSIVE GUILT</td>
<td>(externally apologetic &lt;=&gt; internally burdened)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEED FOR CRISIS</td>
<td>(restless &lt;=&gt; dramatic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GUESSING AT STANDARDS OF LIVING</td>
<td>(doubt &lt;=&gt; arrogance)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LOW SELF-ESTEEM  
( feeling inferior <=> self-destructive)

COMPULSIVITY  
( pain <=> addiction prone)

Shadow Children can be obvious to everyone, but most have learned how to live up to their name. They work at staying in the shadows that abound in every day life. One cannot mention strongly enough about the weight upon the growing child of being socially acceptable, i.e., appearing "normal." School quickly makes the very firmament we stand upon dependent on fitting in. Quickly we are classified, sorted, graded and group designated into the Redbirds, Bluebirds and Buzzards. No one wants to be a buzzard, but we only have 12 red books, 12 blue books, and 12 yellow books. 12 someone is are going to get yellow books. And the school begins its steady re-victimizing of the victims.

Is the school to blame?

I do not blame educators. They are some of the most dedicated, hardworking people I know. But "School" is not a building, it is the conception of a system. The System is no longer adequate. But the educators keep toiling away the years in an attempt to make it work. Sometimes sheer effort works – for a while. But, again, with a 25+% failure to complete rate in this country we can see plainly that without a significant educational paradigm shift the system is creaking towards total breakdown. Meanwhile the functional families protect their children, offering compensatory actions at home to make up for the cognitive and social deficits at School, but the Shadow Children, not having this support in either place – home or school – fall further and further behind.

Do you want to know the end result? Do you want to know some answers for this problem that are already available to schools? I urge you to read the book this article emanated from as there is not enough space here. There ARE answers now. But first, and my purpose in this monograph, we must identify this substantial population right under our noses. There is NO DOUBT that without significant intervention what is now education's #1 problem will soon show itself to be our nation's #1 problem. Every pontificating beaming commencement speaker says to the graduates seated up front, "You are our future!" What is not noticed is that there should be one empty chair for every three occupied ones. Those empty chairs are also our future, and there are more empty seats coming – folded up leaning against the back wall – in the Shadows.

~..~


He is a professor of at-risk education in the graduate School of Education at Marian University in Wisconsin, and was the founder, and spent 12 years as Director, of the National At-Risk Education Network, a non-profit, non-sectarian organization that supports educators working with at-risk youth in education.
Dr. Dallmann-Jones is author of several other books, including *Fixing Public Education*, the *Handbook of Effective Teaching & Assessment Strategies* and *The Expert Educator* and was the co-designer along with Dr. Carleen Vande Zande, of the NAREN Self-Study Guide for schools, titled *Quality Programming for At-Risk Students*. 