

# COACHING ON THE COUCH

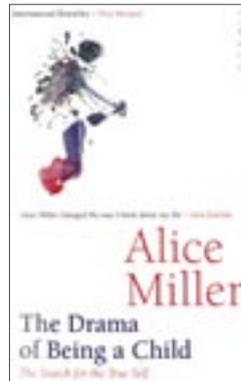
**Erik de Haan** looks at  
*The Drama of Being a Child*, by Alice Miller

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## part 12

### Why it's in the library

Here is a book that goes to the roots of why anyone becomes a coach in the first place. Starting at early childhood, it is about the particular family dynamics that may produce psychotherapists, coaches and consultants.



### Introducing the work

Alice Miller writes about a moving drama: the story of a fragile and vulnerable child arriving in a confusing world in need of parents or carers to survive. Some of his vital needs and wishes will not be fulfilled, creating a sense of disillusionment at a time when he hasn't yet learned how to deal with that. There will also be expectations and demands from his parents that run counter to his natural development.

Miller then traces the responses of this fragile child to his parents' expectations and demands. The first thing he learns is to suppress his own emotions and wishes, when they are not in accordance with his environment. This causes deep pain, frustration and perhaps resentment. That pain is the next thing he has to deal with. Some anger is taken out on his parents; some is turned inwards.

The result is that we spend most of our adult lives trying to right the wrongs of our earliest experiences.

### A personal reading

When reviewing the early childhood of people who become coaches, we often see children whose innate ability as carers put them in a particular position of 'helpfulness' within the family. The coach therefore practises the role at an impossibly early stage.

My personal observation of these phenomena suggests that the decision to become a coach is often to

find a way to help others, and in that way to help oneself. Such a decision is often influenced by the desire to 'put right' something that previously went wrong. This desire has extraordinarily positive consequences for the coach: it results in a great sensitivity to, and genuine empathy with, clients and the ability to keep one's chin up even in difficult coaching assignments.

But it can also be a threat to a coach's effectiveness: if a coach cannot let go of his own 'need to atone', he could become dependent on the whims of — or improvements for — the client.

It is particularly important that coaches do not to allow their personal needs and neediness to stop them really being with their clients. Miller says that would be like bringing a prisoner a great meal in his cell, precisely when he has a good chance to escape.

### Why I think it's inspirational

There is one crucial lesson we can take from this book — that we should know why we became coaches in the first place.

It shows how ambivalent, self-serving and unconscious our own choice to become a coach really can be; how much this choice may expose our own neediness, and how important it is, therefore, to be regularly coached and supervised and to have been in formal therapy before entering the profession.

A coach cannot do without some understanding of what it means to be a coach, and why he has become a coach, and to have seen at least once the small and lonely child that is behind our achievements and our empathy for our clients. We must, at least once, through mourning for what this child has missed out on, embrace our own fate and learn to genuinely help our clients embrace theirs. Reading this book can be an excellent beginning of this work. ■