

A pretty 6-year-old girl has a small scar on her face from a fall she sustained several years ago. The wound was previously treated, but the scar is beginning to widen. The child barely notices it, but the parents decide to consult with a plastic surgeon. The surgeon concedes he can reverse the original scar, making it less noticeable, but there is a small risk because the child will have to be put under general anesthesia.

He advises the parents to wait until she is older. The parents waver. How long will they have to wait to get the correction done? Their daughter's unsightly scar is causing them distress. In this case, whose problem needs treating?

It is late afternoon in a busy hospital emergency room. In two separate cubicles are two children, a boy and a girl of similar ages. One has fallen off a bike; the other has been in a car accident. Both have sustained minor cuts and lacerations.

In the first cubicle the boy is being attended to by one of the emergency room doctors. In the second cubicle the girl is being treated by a plastic surgeon.

Does this reflect undue emphasis on the girl's appearance or discrimination against the boy?

A young adolescent boy who is beginning to develop breasts prevails upon his parents to bring him to a plastic surgeon

to see if anything can be done. His parents agree and seek out a recommendation.

They end up with a lengthy list of names, but they realize that they have no idea about how to evaluate which surgeon would be the right one for their shy, sensitive son. There are, after all, no nicely framed diplomas on a surgeon's wall that reflect his or her compassion, sensitivity or ethics. How do they decide?

From early childhood we are beguiled by fairy tales about good and evil, featuring virtuous and brave heroes and heroines, and cruel villains bearing poisoned fruit and spinning evil spells. In such tales, the heroes are handsome, the heroines are beautiful, and the villains are *always ugly* — with a whole array of physical imperfections afflicting virtually



Illustration by Rich Pope/The Washington Times

## Think carefully before child has plastic surgery

every part of their bodies.

These images, stored in our psyches, then intersect with our own personal histories and the realities of a society that puts great emphasis on the way we look.

So it's not surprising that the issue of children's and adolescents' appearance can be an emotionally charged one for families, especially when they are considering plastic surgery for a son or daughter.

Dr. Allen Rosen, spokesman for the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons, and assistant clinical professor at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, addressed these issues during a recent interview, which began in last week's column.

■ The surgeon's role in assessing family dynamics:

"It's important to understand that a good plastic surgeon doesn't evaluate a specific body part in isolation from other factors which may affect a patient's decision to have surgery.

"In the case of children and adolescents, this is especially important, and it often means assessing the family dynamics between the parents and the child. It's not unusual for a surgeon to assume the role of mediator to help families figure out whether surgery can help a child better deal with the stress that goes along with a physical deformity.

"Even young children have feelings about physical imperfections or about undergoing surgery. So I really want to hear what they, as well as adolescents, have to say. And if I sense that some troubling family dynamic is going on, that the surgery is more for the parents — who might be grappling with feelings of personal guilt or over-identification with a child — I'll speak to each of them separately."

■ The role of gender in plastic surgery and children and adolescents:

"There is no question that our society accepts scars and other

physical imperfections in males more readily than we do in females. This is true for all ages, cutting across all economic and ethnic groups.

"In my experience, plastic surgeons routinely receive requests from local hospital emergency rooms to treat lacerations sustained by girls more often than those sustained by boys. Those calls come at the request of the parents or the emergency room doctor.

"This phenomenon may reflect an overemphasis on girls' appearances or reflect a lack of understanding that boys can feel embarrassed or uncomfortable about scars and lacerations, too. I recently treated an adolescent who had an unsightly laceration on his knee.

"It happened several years before, and had he been female, likely a plastic surgeon would have been called in. But the plastic surgeon in the emergency room doctor felt that the expertise of a plastic surgeon for the repair of a knee scar in a boy, wasn't necessary. As a result, the adolescent suffered embarrassment for years until he expressed his feelings to his parents."

■ Choosing a surgeon for your child:

"The role of a plastic surgeon is a complex. He or she needs to be a surgical artisan but must also understand the human psyche."

"While other doctors have the power to save lives, plastic surgeons have the power to transform them. It's a big responsibility for the surgeon.

"Sometimes, if surgery is done for the wrong reasons or with unreasonable expectations, the transformation may not be for the better. That's why it's so important that a plastic surgeon be sensitive to the emotional as well as the medical needs of the patient.

"But medical training is not necessarily going to impart the ability, and a medical degree does not indicate whether a surgeon is genuinely caring or ethical.

"This is why parents need to seek out surgeons who have been certified by the American Board of Plastic Surgery."

For more information, call the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons at 800/635-0635.

Dr. Janice I. Cohn is a psychotherapist who has specialized for the past 20 years in helping children and adults cope with grief and loss from death, divorce and separation. Dr. Cohn, who is also an author, can be reached by calling 973/509-2320, or by writing to 36 Hawthorne Place, Clair, N.J. 07042.



DR. JANICE COHN

### Instilling compassion