

The Emotional Incest Syndrome
What To Do When a Parent's Love Rules Your Life

By Dr. Patricia Love

- Classic signs: chronic relationship problems & a curious blend of high and low self-esteem
 - Other signs:
 - Problems with peer relationships
 - Eating disorders
 - Depression
 - Anxiety
- The Emotionally Invasive Parent – children are powerless against them and have an intense need to be connected with them.
- Things these types have in common:
 1. Parent uses child to satisfy needs that should be met by other adults – romance, companionship, intimacy, advice, problem solving, ego fulfillment. Children can't handle this and suffer long-lasting effects.
 2. Parent is ignoring needs of the child – when the parents turns to the child, the child is rarely given adequate protection, nurturance, guidance, structure, affection, affirmation or discipline.
 - The child is doing the parenting.
- Common family profiles:
 1. Parent lacks sufficient companionship and support. May be single, divorced, unhappily married, etc.
 2. The parent who is less involved (not enmeshed) feels resentful. Difficult for them to pinpoint why. How can you be angry at spouse for loving the child?
 3. In families with 2 or more children, there is more than the normal amount of sibling rivalry. Long-lasting and severe.

Varieties of Parenting

- The Romanticizing Parent
- parent turns to child of opposite sex for intimacy and companionship that would normally be found in romantic relationship

- The Sexualized Parent
- The emotional incest can be a vicious cycle. The more attention the child gets from one parent and more the other one resents him/her.
- The child is often blind to the faults of the parent, while the other parent is clearly aware of their faults.
- It is difficult for any adult in a relationship with the grown child to match up to the idolized parent. No one is good enough.
- The Neglectful Parent
- Under functioning parent, parentified child.
- The Abusive/Critical Parent
- The abusive parent may find it easier to be angry with the child than the spouse for their enmeshment with the child and replacement of them as confidant, best friend, etc.
- The parent uses guilt as a weapon. The child often feels like a failure despite success.
- Checklist of Enmeshment
- Part A. Indication of an Overly Close Parent-Child Bond
- 1. I felt closer to one parent than the other.
- 2. I was a source of emotional support for one parent.
- 3. I was “best friends” with a parent.
- 4. A parent shared confidences with me.
- 5. A parent was deeply involved in my activities or in developing my talents
- 6. a parent took a lot of pride in my abilities or achievements.
- 7. I was given special privileges or gifts by one of my parents.
- 8. One of my parents told me in confidence that I was the favorite, most talented, or most lovable child.
- 9. A parent thought I was better company than his/her spouse.
- 10. I sometimes felt guilty when I spent time away from one of my parents.
- 11. I got the impression a parent did not want me to marry or move far away from home.
- 12. When I was young I idolized one of my parents.
- 13. Any potential boyfriend/girlfriend of mind was never good enough for one of my parents.

14. A parent seemed overly aware of my sexuality.

15. A parent made inappropriate sexual remarks or violated my privacy.

▪ Part B. Indication of Unmet Adult Needs

1. My parents were separated, divorced, widowed, or didn't get along very well.

2. One of my parents was often lonely, angry or depressed.

3. One of my parents did not have a lot of friends.

4. One or both parent had a drinking or drug problem.

5. One of my parents thought the other parent was too indulgent or permissive.

6. I felt I had to hold back my own needs to protect a parent.

7. A parent turned to me for comfort or advice.

8. A parent seemed to rely on me more than on my siblings.

9. I felt responsible for a parent's happiness.

10. My parents disagreed about parenting issues.

▪ Part C. Indication of Parental Neglect of Abuse

1. My needs were often ignored or neglected.

2. There was a great deal of conflict between me a parent.

3. I was called hurtful names by a parent.

4. One of my parents had unrealistic expectations of me.

5. One of my parents was very critical of me.

6. I sometimes wanted to hide from a parent or had fantasies of running away.

7. When I was a child, other families seemed less emotionally intense than mine.

8. It was often a relief to get away from home.

9. I sometimes felt invaded by a parent.

10. I sometimes felt I added to a parent's unhappiness.

▪ 10 or more endorsements – possibly emotional incest. Look at how the checked items cluster.

▪ The Adult Cost of Being a Chosen Child

▪ They feel polar opposites: Privileged and victimized, talented and worthless, blessed and cursed.

▪ Sometimes these opposites are felt every day and sometimes years apart.

▪ For every privilege from a parent, there is a jealous reaction from someone else.

- Jealous parent or sibling
- Guilt:
 - Guilt sums up the negative experiences of being raised by the Invasive parent.
- Anxiety:
 - A child who plays the role of a surrogate spouse is a likely candidate for anxiety because the role is always a tentative one.
 - This can set up a lifetime of insecurity.
- Self-Image Problems:
 - Widely fluctuates.
 - The parent may tell them that they can do anything because the parent needs them to take care of him/her.
 - It is very heady and grandiose to think this. But low periods follow. Invincibility to inadequacy.
- Fear of Rejection:
 - The Chosen child may feel unlovable. Sounds like a contradiction, but being enmeshed with one parent often provokes the resentment of the other. To win Daddy's love is to risk losing Mommy's.
 - If rejected by the parent, the child assumes the blame. Feels unworthy.
 - Jealous siblings will also retaliate against the Chosen child.
- Social Isolation:
 - Spend less time than is typical with social group so have little opportunity to feel like a part of the group.
 - Because of this, they do not get feedback from peers about behaviors that are not socially appropriate. May hold onto personality quirks that are a liability later in life.
- A Feeling of Inferiority:
 - Children of an Invasive Parent may have an extremely low estimation of their abilities. Too much time with an Invasive parent will cause the child to make so many comparisons of his/her achievements with the parent as to think, "I will never be as good as him/her."

- Denial of Needs
 - The Chosen child has to repress normal needs for his/her parent.
 - The parent's life is easier when the child asks for nothing. The parent feels like a good parent who has raised a model child.
- Hidden Messages:
 - You never cause a minute's trouble. = Don't rock the boat.
 - You are such an easygoing child. = Don't feel anger, sorrow or pain.
 - You are so special. = Be what I want you to be. I have needs that I want you to satisfy.
 - I expect more out of you than the others. = You make my life worth living.
- A Compulsive Need To Succeed:
 - Being normal or average is humiliating.
- A Diffuse Sense of Identity:
 - Enmeshed parent interferes with development of child's sense of identity.
 - Child may act in accordance with what the parent wants or as a negative reaction to what the parent wants.
 - They don't know their own thoughts, feelings, and opinions.
 - Parent may expect child to also mirror their negative traits. Message is "We are just alike, and we are both no good."
 - These people have a difficult time with boundaries. They either have extremely permeable ones or else the wall is so high that no one gets in.
- Fear of Commitment:
 - Problems with love relationships are the "RULE" for the Chosen Child. Most common problem is fear of intimacy and commitment.
 - Close relationships can feel like an evasion after living with the engulfing parent. The notion of freedom within a relationship runs counter to their experience.
- Lack of Romantic Interest:
 - A normal parent-child bond is powerful. The Enmeshed relationship is all-encompassing. Some people go through life trying to recapture this intensity.

- Conflicts Between the Spouse and the Parent:
 - Relationship triangle with the parent, grown child and spouse.
- Attraction to Self-Centered Partners:
 - Unconscious re-creation of the dynamics of the parent-child relationships.
 - Believe that other people's needs are more important than their own.
Marry someone who is unavailable or inattentive. Lack of emotional involvement becomes a source of pain.
- Sexual Problems:
 - Sexual feelings may arise between the Chosen child and parent because they are sharing their innermost thoughts and feelings. This energy has to go somewhere so it is either repressed or expressed.
 - Children of Sexualizing parent are at risk for being victimized (by parent or someone else).

The Players

- The Invasive Parent
 - If this person is married it may seem like they have the best of both worlds at first glance. Him/her and the Chosen child are enmeshed AND he/she has a spouse to share tasks and have sex with.
 - But the parent will have to contend with the spouse's jealousy over the child-parent relationship. The Invasive parent may be forced to choose between two people he/she loves.
- The Left Out Child
 - "You are not a priority in my life." Is the clear message.
 - Difficult to maintain high self-esteem under such conditions.
 - May try desperately to gain the parent's love and approval.
 - Others become sullen and vent their rage at the parent. This leads to the inevitable comparison with the Chosen one.
 - Others seek approval outside the family. Gangs or cults.
 - May attempt to bond with the other parent. Leads to this child being another Chosen Child.
- Left Out Spouse

- Most commonly misunderstood. May feel violently jealous but have a hard time justifying this feeling. Very difficult to pinpoint because it is not any one behavior between Invasive parent and Chosen child that can be pointed to but rather the dynamic as a whole.
- Spouse may become depressed instead of angry.
- Some cope with outside activities: affair, work, hobbies, civic duty.
- May become enmeshed with a second child.
- Shadow Parent
 - Passive, detached, non-interfering
 - Says to the child: “Don’t upset your mother/father. Do what she says. Let’s let our relationship be our little secret. I won’t stand up for you. You’ll have to fend for yourself.”
- Spouse of Chosen Child
 - Marriage is a relationship between two equals. But the Chosen Child takes center stage – has no experience with equality. Equality feels like a demotion. Dominates the relationship without knowing it.
 - The Adult Chosen Child who defended against the Invasive parent by building a wall will not let in their spouse. Unconscious fear of engulfment.
 - Spouse has two choices in dealing with the invasive in-law: 1. give in to demands. 2. treat the parent as an intruder. The adult Chosen child may unconsciously encourage battles between spouse and parent to encourage his/her own feelings of emancipation.

Why Do Parents Become Overinvolved with their Children?

- Probably do not realize they are harming their children.
- May see themselves as devoted, self-sacrificing.
- Don’t realize that in addition to giving their children love and attention they are also using the relationships to satisfy their own needs.
- Pleasures of parenting:
 - Physical contact, intimacy, unconditional love, source of pride
- Lack of Information and Role Models:

- Ignorance about family relationships and dynamics. Don't know how spouses are SUPPOSE to treat each other. Unfortunately they may look to TV or movies to figure this out.
- Lack of Self Awareness:
 - They don't have the objectivity needed to see their own lives as they are.
- Warning Signs:
 - Wanting a child soon after marriage, unless there are extenuating circumstances. May signal that one or both adults are uncomfortable with the marriage relationship.
 - Nursing a baby into the toddler years. "What the hell is this about?" That's not in the book, it's what I said. Books says it is an exaggerated need for physical closeness.
 - Permitting child to sleep in adult bed. May be unwittingly encouraging child's dependency.
 - Teaching a child at home. May be trying to maintain an exclusive relationship.
 - Reluctance to hire babysitters. Mask overinvolvement with child – can't find anyone "suitable."
 - Reluctant to let child spend night with a friend or go to summer camp. Parent is trying to delay healthy stage of development.
 - Feeling unusually distraught that a child will be leaving home. Normal to miss them, but getting depressed is a sign of overdependency.
 - Setting more restriction on a child's activities than is common with other parents. As a result, child spends too much time at home.
 - Resenting the time child spends with friends. Healthy – encouragement of friendships. Overinvolved – parent may make child feel guilty.
 - Devoting too much time in development of child's talents. May frustrate child's natural movement toward independence.

Families At Risk

- Single-Parent Families – ripe conditions for emotional incest, especially during few years just following the divorce. Mechanics of running a single parent house

contribute to emotional incest. Lack of money – causes parent and children to stay home with each other more. Also, Disneyland Dad syndrome contributes to enmeshment with him/her.

- Step-families – the parent may have become overly involved with or dependent upon the child before the marriage. The parent has a double alliance – with the child and new spouse. Parent may treat the child like more of a buddy than a child. This “no rules” lifestyle may cause problems for the child in terms of grades and trouble with society; may cause problems with the new spouse.
- The only child – no other child to “take the heat” so everything the child does or does not do is scrutinized. All of the parents’ worries and wishes are channeled into one child. Lack of in-house playmates heightens the child-parent bond. This child may become surprisingly mature. But this discrepancy from peers causes social problems.
- Substance abuse - creates an inevitable emotional void in the marriage because an addict can not be a satisfactory marriage partner.
- Mental illness – the child and parent may unify to take care of the ill parent.

Differences Between Enmeshed and Healthy Families

- Healthy Families – there is a clear separation between generations. Permeable boundary.
- The Spousal Unit – Roles and Responsibilities of Adult Partners
 - Respect and support each other
 - Nurture each other
 - Practice tolerance
 - Have fun together
 - Adult partners are lovers
 - Share significant interests
 - Partners are confidants
 - Financial partners
 - Adults are each other’s primary social partners.
 - Resolve conflicts and work out problems
 - When a marriage doesn’t live up to this standard, there is an unconscious or conscious wish that it would.

- If marriage doesn't meet these needs there is a void in their lives.
- The Parental Unit – Roles and Responsibilities of Parents
 - Provide food, shelter, clothing and medical and dental care.
 - Offer the children adequate protection. From danger and from information and experiences they are not equipped to handle.
 - Physical affection.
 - Understand and accept normal stages of child development.
 - Take developmental stage into account when assigning privileges and responsibilities
 - Establish clear rules and guidelines
 - Validate child's thoughts and feelings and teach appropriate ways to express them.
 - Respect and encourage child's uniqueness
 - Parent's support each other's authority
 - Encourage child's independence
 - Difference between Parenting and Partnering
 - Parenting is a selfless task. Partnering is mutual.
- The Sibling Unit – Roles and Responsibilities of Siblings
 - Teach each other valuable social skills
 - Form a natural support group
 - Form a society of near equals
 - Provide a social setting for learning
 - Help each other develop and refine an accurate personal history.
- Consequences of living in a functional family
 - When the 3 above units function in a healthy manner everyone benefits. The adults have a strong support system and the children progress along a normal path of development.

RECOVERY

- Step 1: take a guided tour through your childhood. Involves remembering significant life events and the feelings associated with this. By recalling those emotions and

expressing them more fully than you were allowed to do in the past, you will regain parts of your original wholeness.

- Step 2: realign your present-day relationships. You can't undo how your parents related to you in the past, but you can change the way you relate to them now. No need for traumatic scenes or confrontations. This is a gentle realignment. Also important at this stage to shore up current support system.
- Second order change – occurs when you change your perception about relationships, allowing you to act and react in a normal manner. This changes how they respond to you.
- JND: Just Noticeable Differences – As you collect data about your past and view your history with more objectivity some guilt and anxiety will dissipate. Behaviors will also begin to change. Changes are small at first. Over time, these add up and the old dysfunctional patterns are replaced with more healthy ones.
- Obstacles to recovery – Denial and resistance, guilt, avoidance of pain.

Tools for Recovery

- Autobiography Exercise – write out or share with someone an abbreviated version of your life story. Instead of pushing down feelings, amplify them. This may feel very uncomfortable. May feel very vulnerable afterwards. Remember that feelings are your friends – they are there to guide you to a healthy life. The key to emotional health is to break o your logjam of unprocessed emotions until the river runs free and clear.
 - Be patient with blocked feelings. To unlock buried emotions, encourage them whenever they begin to surface. When you are in a safe place, try to amplify the feelings.
 - If you tell your autobiography to a friend, they should not offer suggestions or interpret.
 - See outline for autobiography on pate 144.
 - Family Interview – to gain additional insight. See list of possible questions starting on page 150.
- Family Genogram or Political Map
 - What would an impartial observer say about your family genogram?

- Do the problems in the family seem to be increasing or diminishing over time? To what would you attribute the change?
- Summarize what you have learned.
 - What has affected you most deeply about the recovery process to date? Have your feelings changed about certain family members? If so, how?
 - What feelings have been stimulated by this process?

Making Peace With Your Parents

- Your relationship with your parents is very important because it influences the rest of your relationships.
- Becoming more objective. You know you have achieved some degree of this when:
 - You can interact with your parents without being unduly upset or disappointed.
 - Your assessment of your parents tends to correspond with others' assessments of them.
 - You see positive and negative traits in both of them. You no longer blame them for all of your difficulties.
- Accepting your parents' negative traits. They are not going to change. Understand that the traits we find most difficult to accept are those that caused us the most damage in childhood. Accepting them doesn't mean approving of their hurtful behavior. It means giving up the fantasy of whom you want them to be.
 - Identify a most hurtful aspect of the parent's personality style.
 - How much of the time (%) does he or she act like this? Guestimate. Tell yourself that ___% of the time, it would be unrealistic of you to expect any other behavior from this parent.
- Affirm a Parent's Positive Qualities. Talk with friends or siblings about what the parent's positive qualities are. List 5 admirable qualities. The next time you visit with this parent, see if you can see these qualities. What positive qualities do you share with this parent?
- Setting Limits – it is reasonable that parents and adult children are obligated to keep each other apprised of certain things, such as illness, family member death, job change, divorce or marriage, change of address. Also, adult children should in some

manner see to the care of aging parents. Beyond this, relationships involve choice. Healthy relationships involve celebration, history sharing, sharing rituals, and affection.

- Examining your reasons for staying enmeshed. It is probably not all them. You may allow enmeshment out of guilt, feeling responsible for a parent, to hold on to advantage of being the chosen one, fear of making waves.
- The 10 second confrontation – when the parent steps over the line, state your position clearly and briefly. Strive to keep the rest of your interactions as normal as possible. You don't have to disown them because you are placing clear boundaries.
 - It may be helpful to rehearse your confrontation with a friend. You know what they will say that will upset you. Rehearse your response.
 - Get the help of a professional if you need it.
 - Create a more positive relationship with your parent.
 - Fake it til you make it.
 - Do something different. Break old, dysfunctional patterns. If you feel like a 12 year old when you go to your parent's house, then ask them to meet you in town for dinner.
 - A formal reconciliation meeting – this will only work if the parent has insight. Also, for it to work you must have a realistic attitude.
 - See suggested outline for meeting on page 178.
- Resolving feelings about a deceased parent – see model for letter on page 180.
- Making peace with your in-laws – if your spouse was the Chosen child and continues to be enmeshed. Whose problem is it? If the parent is violating your rights, then you talk with him/her. If the parent is violating your spouse' rights, then it is up to them to do the talking.

Making Peace With Your Siblings

- Is the conflict between you traceable to roles you both played as children?
- Candid camera Exercise: someone speaks up on you at a family reunion and takes a picture of you, your parents and siblings that tells the whole truth about your family relationships. What would each person be doing? Would anyone be left out of the picture? How would you caption the photo?

- Fantasy Island Exercise: Imagine that you and all your brothers and sister are living on a small island. You are the only inhabitants. Visualize the island the place your house where you would feel most comfortable. Now add a house for each sibling. Who would live closest to you? Who would live furthest away? Look at paths worn between houses. Which houses do they connect? If a storm demolished some of the houses, who would move in with you? If a boat were your only contact with the mainland, whom would you choose to supervise the use of the boat? If your parents visited, where would they stay? Would anyone be jealous? Would anyone be relieved?
- Directions for a reconciliation meeting with siblings. See page 191.

Strengthening Your Marriage Relationship

- If your family of origin was enmeshed then it is practically guaranteed that you will have problems in love relationships.
- Possible problems:
 - Hx. Of picking partners who are interested in their needs at your expense
 - Hx. Of picking partner who are unavailable in some way (married, emotionally or geographically distant, etc.)
 - Conflict because you have strong alliances with a parent.
 - Fear of abandonment.
 - Fear of engulfment
 - Hx of affairs or partner with hx of affairs.
 - Difficulty in finding a suitable mate.
 - Lack of romantic attraction to your partner.
- Second order change – realigning your relationship with your parents will impact your relationship with your spouse.
- Create a positive vision – imagine you and your partner being there for each other, meeting each other’s needs and growing and learning together.
- Create a marriage affirmation.
- The Universal Homework Assignment – spend several hours each week doing something mutually enjoyable without explaining the nature of your activities to other family members.

- Expect the Chosen child to be resistant. You may be resistant, too. Do it anyway.
- Deepening Intimacy – See exercise on page 206.
- Use active listening skills.
- Use short statements – the longer you talk, the more people tune out. Use short statements.
- Use problem-solving and compromise.
- Turn off the Projector (projection).
- Polarization – it is the human tendency to balance each other. It can quickly become destructive. One way to stop this is to switch sides. It may help you to see the other's position.
- Celebrate positive changes – use rituals to do this. Special dinner, ceremony, gifts, 2nd honeymoon.

Shore up Your Support Network

- Firming up weak boundaries. Role play with someone or a therapist. Good way to program new behavior.
- Lowering your emotional barriers. When a friend calls and asks how you are, reveal something that is going on with you. Or, when a friend wants to get together, suggest you do something out of the ordinary. These shared activities will create a lasting bond.
- Examine strength of support. Draw a symbol in the middle to represent you. Draw a symbol for important people in your life (squares and circles). Draw large symbols for those who affect you strongly and small symbols for those who affect you less strongly. Write initials inside the symbols. Connect each symbol to your symbol with a pair of lines: one line is the energy you send out and the other is the energy you receive.
 - Positive energy – straight line
 - Neutral – dotted line
 - Negative – jagged line
 - Lines coming and going may be different.
 - Can also include additional symbols to represent hobbies, pets, etc.

- Make sure that the symbol is placed in proximity to yours in relation to how often you see the person. Size is relative to importance of this person to you.
- Examine the chart to determine health of your network.
- Is there anyone you “forgot” to put on the chart?
- Are you sending out more energy than you are receiving?
- Are you getting more energy from males than females.
- Are friends more supportive than family?
- Is there a lot of negative energy coming from in-law or parent?

Healthy Parenting

- Warning sign that you are enmeshed with YOUR child – you want them to spend more time at home when they should be gaining more independence.
1. Share information with your child only when it is in their best interest.
 2. Keep your marriage problems between you and your spouse.
 3. Turn to adults for emotional needs.
 4. Reinforce your child’s unique qualities
 5. Respect and encourage your child’s independence.
 6. Encourage your child’s friendships with other children.
 7. Give your child the safety and security of limits
 8. Search for the positive qualities in each child.
 9. Make your adults relationships a priority
 10. Assure your children of your well-being.

Free your child from enmeshment – Realignment session

- Assure the child of your love
- State the facts. “I relied on you too heavily.”
- Share your feelings
- Share key information
- Absolve the child of guilt
- Assure the child that you no longer require his or her emotional support
- Apologize.
- Commit to a healthy relationship

- End with reassurance.
- Practice what you preach.

Realignment session with a Left-Out child

- Begin by summarizing your relationship
- Apologize for your part in the estrangement
- Let the child know that he or she is not to blame.

