



“A Legacy Filled Parent Avoids These Enmeshment Behaviors”

By Mary Ellen Mann, LCSW

Henry Cloud, a man whose work changed my life, has written: “Someone of virtue is a force, and a force always leaves a result.” ***A legacy filled parent seals his/her reputation as a change agent*** when s/he builds up what was broken by promising to seek after God no matter the confusion, anger or pain.

When we stop carrying around our pain like it’s who are, we can begin to own that we need God to restore us. Then we can bring our gifts to God. Remember, God wants you—healed, broken, angry, lost or found—more than He wants sacrifice. As Jesus said, “I desire mercy [for ourselves and others], not sacrifice” (Matthew 9: 13).

Once we pay attention to practice being the change we want to see, we then float our attention to the reality of how this changes what we do with people, starting with our home life.

The most important to know to become a Legacy filled Parent is to consider whether any of the following enmeshed parenting traits seem familiar to you. Dr. Patricia Love’s book *The Emotional Incest Syndrome* has been a fundamental tool in my practice and has been foundational for me to understand what to avoid as a parent.

And while reading her list, which follows, I urge you to see whether the following signs of enmeshment occurred in your childhood experience. I also encourage you to consider whether you are using any of these infringing behaviors on your children. Below are the signs of enmeshment often overlooked by well-meaning parents, who were not given the necessary tools to protect their child’s dignity. (“Parent” can be used interchangeably with “caregiver.”)

Indications of an Overly Close Parent-Child Bond

I felt closer to one parent than the other.

I was a source of emotional support for one of my parents.

I was “best friends” with a parent.

A parent shared confidences with me.

A parent was deeply involved in my activities or in developing my talents.

A parent took a lot of pride in my abilities or achievements. (Trophies/report cards in family areas of the house)

I was given special privileges or gifts by one of my parents.

One of my parents told me in confidence that I was the favorite, most talented, or most lovable child.

Henry Cloud, *Integrity: The Courage To Meet the Demands of Reality* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 41

Patricia Love, *The Emotional Incest Syndrome: What To Do When A Parent’s Love Rules Your Life*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 25, 26

A parent thought I was better company than his or her spouse.
I sometimes felt guilty when I spent time away from one of my parents.
I got the impression a parent did not want me to marry or move away from home.
When I was young, I idolized one of my parents.
Any potential boyfriend or girlfriend of mine was never “good enough” for one of my parents.
A parent seemed overly aware of my sexuality.
A parent made inappropriate sexual remarks or violated my privacy.

Indication of Unmet Adult Needs

My parents were separated, divorced, widowed or didn't get along very well.
One of my parents was often lonely, angry, or depressed.
One of my parents did not have a lot of friends.
One or both of my parents had a problem with drinking or drugs, or addictions to other behaviors, such as legalism, work, shopping, or pornography.
One of my parents thought the other parent was too indulgent or permissive.
I felt I had to hold back my own needs to make sure I did not burden my parent with my problems.
A parent turned to me for comfort or advice.
A parent seemed to rely on me more than on my siblings.
I felt responsible for a parent's happiness.
My parents disagreed about parenting issues.

Indication of Parental Neglect or Abuse

My needs were often ignored or neglected.
There was a great deal of conflict between me and a parent.
I was called hurtful names by a parent.
One of my parents had unrealistic expectations of me.
One of my parents was very critical of my achievements, how I looked, or what I revealed to our community.
I sometimes wanted to hide from a parent or had fantasies of running away.
When I was a child, other families seemed less emotionally intense than mine.
It was often a relief to get away from home.
I sometimes felt invaded by a parent.
I sometimes felt I added to a parent's unhappiness.¹

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Notice what fits your experience as a child and what fits your behavior as a parent.

Summarily, the dynamics of incestuous families involve heavy use of denial, minimization, and rationalization, along with confused roles, secrecy, rigid beliefs and expectations, loss of trust in authority, and lack of expression of warmth. When one really wakes up from such relational illness, as enmeshment, and tries to parent his or her children, the challenges can be overwhelming.

However, be encouraged. I know that you would not be reading this if you were not looking for ways to improve your relationship with your child. **Prayerfully consider whether your relationship with your child would benefit from seeking your child's input on whether they have experienced any of the above enmeshment qualities in their relationship with you.** I urge you to see your child's honesty as a blessing.

More specifically, ask your child: "Did/Do you experience that you were my emotional support?" If they answer no, move onto the next enmeshment sign in the list. If they answer positively, ask your child: "Would you help me understand how I did/do that so that I can cease using you in this way?"

If they are interested in communicating what has happened with you, I coach parents I work with to do the following in response to their child's answers:

1. Thank your child for their honest feedback.
2. Apologize for burdening your child.
3. Do not explain the context or excuse the behavior they believe enmeshed them.
4. Take notes on what they say.
5. Confess these concerns to a friend/counselor/pastor so that you are able to get support so that you can prevent any further enmeshment with him/her.
6. Remember that it is NEVER too late to establish safety and respect in your relationship with your child. It doesn't matter if your child is 40 years old or older. You are the most powerful and significant indicator of their worth in their lifetime.

Thank you for reading this. I hope you are encouraged to take back the choice to recover whatever may be broken between you and your child. Be a person of virtue who leaves a result as a legacy filled parent.

(Ideas for this article are taken in part from my book *From Pain to Power*, "Your Legacy.")

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