

EP#9 – PODCAST --PARENTING A PARENT

What happens when a child grows up feeling like he or she is supposed to parent a parent? Or parent his or her siblings? What happens, in other words, when the proper relationship between the generations get all screwed up?

I'm not talking about caring for a parent who is old and infirm.

I'm not talking about a pattern beginning in childhood of assuming responsibility for a parent's psychological comfort and well-being. In my clinical experience, this dynamic is common and invariably leads to emotional pain and suffering.

Psychotherapists have noted the effects of this role-reversal for decades. We speak of the "parentified" child, who develops an especially acute sensitivity to one or both parent's moods and stresses and feels responsible for "fixing" them. In

the course of such attempts to comfort or fix the parent, the child sacrifices his or her own autonomy, ambition, and/or personal life satisfactions.

One male patient of mine became his mother's confidante, listening at length to her complaints about his father. He felt guilty about going out to play with friends and engaging in typical masculine pursuits because it meant — symbolically — abandoning or betraying his mother. A female patient of mine recalled feeling as if her mother vicariously lived through her. She felt obliged to call her mother every day to report on the ups and downs of her social and work life. My patient never felt that her successes were her own. And still another patient took over the care of her younger siblings and alcoholic father because her mother was so depressed that she took to her bed much of the time. She became the de facto mother but rarely felt mothered herself.

In many of these cases, the mother was the weak link in the family. Sometimes the father is the parent that needs to be taken care of, but since mothers in our culture are still much more responsible than fathers for child care and, therefore more important to a child's psychological development and security, when a mother is weak or inadequate, the pressure on a child to step in and pick up the slack is much greater.

The emotional effects of growing up as the caretaker of one's parents are complicated but almost always damaging. The child gives up his or her childhood in order to mother a mother or fix a father. Because one feels so irrationally responsible for a parent's welfare, then ordinary and health wishes to separate and become independent come to feel disloyal and this creates an enormous wellspring of guilt. This can lead, on the one hand, to the development of a precocious empathy for the suffering of others. Now

such empathy can sometimes be a virtue (for example, many psychotherapists were once parentified children. And there's nothing wrong with empathy. But too much empathy can lead to a neglect of one's own selfish needs, even an inability to take care of oneself. The parentified child is a prisoner of the moods of others, and often becomes an adult who shows a tendency to be self-sacrificial or masochistic in exaggerated ways.

The plight of children who take on too much responsibility for other family members is perfectly understandable—Why? Well, because our security, our psychic survival is dependent on the health and well-being of our parents. When a parent is anxious, depressed, or otherwise unhappy, the child experiences those feelings deeply- and then as deeply dangerous-- because parents are crucial to the child's survival and development. Insecure or emotionally disabled parents threaten that survival.

Thus, the child is highly motivated to restore a real or imagined sense of safety and security using whatever means possible, including by attempting to heal his or her wounded caretakers.

These are the normal vicissitudes of attachment. Optimally, the attachment system is insured by the parents' capacity to attune themselves to their children's needs, but in the absence of that, this process goes in the other direction.

Some parents greatly worsen this dynamic, this asymmetrical relationship, by explicitly depending too much on the child to regulate these parents' self-esteem or moods. In these cases, the child is in an impossible bind, because the parent is overtly communicating that the child *should* feel responsible for him or her. The painful fact that the child then feels less protected and guiltier about his or her own needs is irrelevant. And I've been impressed, over and over again, by families in which the parents

openly and explicitly depend on their children for their security and/or self-esteem.

These dysfunctional patterns invariably tend to repeat themselves in adult relationships. An adult who was a parentified child acts as if self-sacrifice is a precondition for love, or as if being able to read a partner's mind is the hallmark of a healthy relationship. While empathy and altruism are, indeed, strengths in a relationship, when they override personal well-being it leads to unhealthy outcomes.

Parentified children may grow up and repeat this pattern with their own children, or may burden adult relationships with inordinate feelings of dependency, or may attract partners who are needy and dependent like their own parents were.

A woman I treated—I'll call her Susan—sought therapy with me for help with a marriage in which she felt chronically cheated. She took care of everything

in the family, including being the breadwinner, and was critical of her husband's lack of ambition and his daily marijuana use. She couldn't confront him, however, because of a fear he'd feel betrayed—she'd let this situation go on for a long time without complaint, she knew-- and leave her, a prospect that frightened her. We were able to see the ways that her marriage repeated the dynamics of her relationship with her mother. Susan's mother was a vain and insecure woman who seemed to thrive on compliments from her daughter about her appearance. In addition, Susan remembers that when she, Susan, would come home from dates, her mother liked to be entertained with detailed accounts of what happened. Susan took care of her mother in ways that one normally imagines a mother taking care of a child. When Susan grew up, she picked a man to marry who was insecure and vain like her mother and spent many years sacrificing for him and more or less accepting the painful reality that her

needs were forever neglected. With help—and armed with this insight—Susan was eventually able to leave her husband.

In closing, I think we should remember this: Parents should remain parents and kids should be able to be kids. When the roles are reversed, trouble always results.