

Companionate Children:

For the past few weeks I have been writing about the roles that children play in families and referred to one common role as the role of the 'Bound Child'. The 'bound child' is attached to their parents and families in ways that place them toward the center of the family in ways that become ultimately problematic for the child. There are three kinds of *bound* children – parental children, companionate children, and dependent children.

Parental children function as mini-parents in the family, sometimes working alongside the parents, sometimes actually parenting the parents. Companionate children function as peers with their parents. Like parental children they are pressured to be more adult than is healthy for them. Companionate children become their parents' best friends. Finally, dependent children are held in an exaggerated childlike position. Unlike parental children, they are encouraged to be less mature than they are capable of being.

Last week I described the parental child. Next week I will look at the dependent or 'spoilt' child.

This week I will look at the companionate child. This type of bound child, that is a child that is sucked into the center of the emotional life of the family, is the child that has become an emotional companion to one of the parents.

We all need friends: caring peers with whom we can share our struggles and joys. When adults lack peer adult support, and particularly when that quality of comfortable sharing is absent in the marriage, those adults' children are often called on to meet this basic need. The companionate child is such a person.

This kind of intimate relationship is very common between mothers and daughters, is not problematic unless the parent depends on the relationship too heavily. As one mother put it:

"My daughter and I were always talking. When she was in secondary school, I could not wait for her to come home from school. We would talk about her day, the gossip of other girlfriends; and though I tried not to lean on her too heavily, I know I talked a lot about myself and I complained about her father. But we had lots of fun and I really enjoyed being with her."

Fathers and sons also form companionships, though they are often oriented around activities such as sport, cars, or music. Of course companionate relationships also exists between fathers and daughters and between mothers and sons.

Companionate children are often cheated of the experience of being able to lean on a strong, authoritative parent – someone they can 'test the limits' with, learn to fight with, and ultimately depend on. Companionate children are flattered to be their parents' friends, and they rarely notice the sense of betrayal that they feel.

Companionate children also have difficulty in breaking away from the parent who depends on them. As that mother put it:

“Every time I think about her Leaving Cert year I get a little teary. We started to fight about halfway through the year, and it got worse and worse. We fought about everything – her boyfriend, her study, her career choice. She started to oppose me at every turn. Then one day we both broke down crying, and I said to her, “We are drifting apart, aren’t we?” After that we both realized what was happening, and we could talk about it.”

The loss of the companionate child through the normal process of growing up is a serious problem in many families, particularly for the mother who does not have enough friendship in her marriage or meaning in her life outside of her relationship with her children. But many men do not have satisfying relationships either, and the departure of a companionate child can create in them a deep sense of loss.

The net effect of being a *bound* child (whether 'parentified' into assuming adult responsibilities, 'companionated' into being a parent's friend, married into being momma's boy or daddy's girl, or spoiled into being weak and helpless) is that later in life it becomes hard to leave home. Because the parents of 'bound children' need them so badly, they unconsciously set up obstacles that make it hard for them to leave and can communicate this in the most subtle and indirect ways. Because 'bound children' are so loyal and so sensitive to their parents' needs, they respond strongly to their parent's anxieties about their leaving and therefore find it so hard to 'grow up'.