

### **Dependent 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.

Over the past couple of weeks I described the parental child and the companionate child. Today I will discuss the dependent child. This type of bound child is a child that is, like the others, sucked into the center of the emotional life of the family through the parent's excessive helpfulness or attentiveness.

In this case the child is systematically, if unwittingly, taught by the parents to feel helpless or weak. Such parents communicate that the world is a fearful place, and that this child needs special help and protection, thereby keeping the child unnecessarily dependent and immature. Youngest children are especially vulnerable to this strategy, as are girls. To some degree, the overprotection of girls is a kind of cultural norm.

It is interesting to see that parents who, if you excuse the expression, infantilize their children often got little support themselves as children growing up. They may seem like adequate adults, but internally they remain emotionally deprived; it is this deprived inner child which they project onto their literal child. In over helping their child, they are indirectly attempting to meet their own needs, trying to be for the child the kind of parent they wanted for themselves.

So they not only fail to see their child's need for independence, they keep the child habitually dependent. The child becomes, in effect, a prisoner of helpfulness, a reassurance addict, if you will. In adult life it is difficult for this child to find someone who will be as attentive and helpful and they therefore often return home in later life. In the worst case scenario this child can be bound for life, unable to grow up or break free of the mother's apron strings. In Irish life it is not uncommon to find this in rural families where a son who inherits a farm is also emotionally bound with his mother to such a degree that his wife always feels like she is second fiddle to his 'first love'.

Indeed mothers are often guiltier than fathers of infantilizing a child, but for a complex set of reasons for which they are hardly to blame. "You spoil and baby the children" a husband will sometimes state to his wife.

The thing is that mothering is often a profoundly lonely activity. Many mothers feel stressed, alone, and unsupported by their husbands. Often mothers give much more

than they receive. In the emotional vacuum of their role, women can gain emotional closeness through care-taking their children. However, while mothers are often blamed for binding their children to them in this way, the problem of father-absence lies behind many of these dilemmas. Many readers grew up with a self-sacrificing mother who gave more than she received. The trouble of course is that if a parent sacrifices too heavily for a child the child can feel indebted for ever.

The bottom line though is that when parents make children weak and dependent by spoiling them or by being ever-present the child gets bound to the parent in ways that interfere with healthy independence. It is a balance that most parents handle well, but on many an occasion can unknowingly cause the child to grow up feeling needier than is necessary.