

Parental Children:

Last week I wrote about the roles that children play in families and referred to one common role as the role of the bound child. The bound child has become 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. 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. However, today I will focus on parental children.

There are three kinds of parental children. The first are household helpers. Some parental children are drafted at an early age to help with the functional, practical part of parenting. Oldest girls are especially vulnerable to become “assistant mothers” – helping with cooking, housework, and childcare. As long as the burdens are not too heavy, this is not a bad role to occupy. Girls can learn skills and become closer to their mother’s in these ways. Boys too can play these roles. In the past many boys left school early to earn money for the family or often worked beside their fathers in the family business or farm.

The second kind of parental child assume too much of the emotional responsibility of parenthood. This is particularly likely to occur when one parents is physically or psychologically absent – this is not uncommon in families where there is an alcoholic or mentally ill or unstable parent.

Parental children are often seen, from the outside, as being extremely competent practical helpers. Everyone, including the child, believes he or she is extremely strong. Parents frequently say about such children, “She is so independent, she does not really seem to need us”. The unfortunate fact is that the parents need to see this child as strong. Inside, if it a girl, she feels deprived and empty; and the only way she knows how to meet her needs is by helping. This is his/her way of “connecting”, and of feeling safe; and while this role affords her a valued place in the family, it also sets her up for some difficulties in later life related to over-functioning and over-responsibility - roles that are so hard to relinquish.

A large number of families have at least one dysfunctional parent, and some of the children in these families are drawn into care-taking roles with that parent. If a parent is seriously depressed, alcoholic, abusive, or mentally ill/unstable, the other parent is often preoccupied with the family’s practical survival – and angry at his or her failed spouse. It falls to one or more children to take care of this wounded adult; and the experience of doing so forms in these children a primitive, often lifelong fear: *“If I do not take good care of others; something terrible will happen”*.

A third type of situation in which a child learns to be parental is when the child is perceived by the parent *to be literally the parent’s parent*. This is obviously a

disturbed process, but it is common. This primitive process is responsible for much emotional and physical child abuse. The needy parent loads expectations on the child, and when the child cannot live up to them, he/she becomes the target of the parent's anger. The origin of this anger is really the parent's original rage at his or her own parents. So a child gets beaten or humiliated for literally disappointing the parent in some small way.

In general, however, certain children are vulnerable to becoming parentified or 'bound' children because they have so many opportunities to be helpful. Eldest children are often drawn into parental roles and, because of their care-taking functions, girls seem to be slightly more vulnerable to assuming these roles than their brothers.

Parental children grow up very aware of their parents needs, are often unaware of their own, often work too hard for their own good, have trouble setting limits for how much they are responsible for, and are often attracted to needy or unstable people and try to take care of them. (It is not uncommon at all to find children of alcoholic fathers marrying alcoholics themselves.)

More often than not, however, they are caring, competent, and lovely people who do far more than their share of the world's work. While we all depend on them, they are at risk of being exploited by all of us. They become 'carers'. So, for today, identify the someone who was the parental child in your family and don't forget that they need caring too.