



# **Enmeshed Parenting**

## **Are You Enmeshed With Your Children?**

By Dr. Margaret Paul

**Are you limiting yourself and your children by being over-involved with them? Discover whether you are enmeshed with your children.**

The Encarta World English Dictionary defines "enmesh" as "to entangle somebody or something in something from which it is difficult to be extricated or separated."

Are you entangled with your children in a way that is limiting both you and your children?

Parents may enmesh with children when they want control over their children and they want their children to take responsibility for them. By over-involving themselves in their children's lives, they hope to tie their children to them in such a way that their children feel guilty over their parent's pain and responsible for it.

There are various ways a parent may enmesh with his or her children:

- When parents don't have a strong sense of their own identity, they may over-identify with their children. This means that they are over-invested in their children's performance, such as grades, sports or talents. We've all seen the enmeshed father at his children's sports events - yelling at the coach or at the child, or the enmeshed mother of a child who is on stage, screen, or doing commercials. The parent who screams at a teacher for their child's bad grade is another example of an enmeshed parent. The parent who insists that their child goes to med school when the child really wants to be an artist is another example. Rather than supporting the child in following his or her heart, the parent threatens a withdrawal of approval to control the child.
- When a parent is devoted to being a victim and not taking responsibility for their own feelings, they may cry, yell, blame, and in various other ways "pull" on their children to make themselves happy. A parent who sits in a chair with a miserable look or walks away crying pathetically is pulling on his or her

child to connect with them and fill their emptiness. Since they are taking no responsibility for themselves, they are a bottomless pit, and nothing the child does really helps. Eventually the child may shut down to the parent, distancing themselves because they don't want to be controlled and they don't want responsibility for their parent's feelings. The parent ends up getting the opposite of what he or she wants.

- A parent can also make a child responsible for his or her physical health. "If you do that, you will give me a heart attack," is the kind of guilt-inducing statement that this parent might make.
- Some parents get their sense of identity by being right. They not only believe they are right; they believe they have the right to impose their views onto their children. Rather than supporting their children in being true to themselves, they make their "love" dependent upon their children following their religion, their politics, their sports, their interests or their values.
- Some parents use money and things to gain the control they want. By threatening to withdraw financial support, they attempt to force their children into becoming what they want them to be. They want to be able to brag about their children as a way of enhancing their own diminished sense of self.
- Finally, a parent may be enmeshed with their children because they are taking responsibility for their children's feelings. Rather than taking care of themselves and role-modeling personal responsibility for their own feelings, they are over-involved with making sure their children are happy - trying to take away every sadness, every hurt, or every moment of boredom.

Enmeshed, over-involved parents often want to blame their partner or someone else when their children don't perform to expectations, or their children pull away, or rebel with drugs, alcohol, or an eating disorder. This parent wants to deny the fact that he or she has been a poor role model for taking personal responsibility for his or her own feelings and wellbeing.

If you are enmeshed with your children, the way to heal is to do your own Inner Bonding work, developing your loving Adult and learning to take responsibility for your own feelings.

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**Are you an enmeshed parent? Discover if you are and what you can begin to do about it.**

*"Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They came through you but not from you and though they are with you yet they belong not to you."*

-- Kahlil Gibran

### **Symptoms of enmeshed parenting:**

- Your children's good or difficult behavior and successful or unsuccessful achievements define your worth.
- Your children are the center of your life - your purpose in life.
- Your focus is on taking care of your children rather than taking care of yourself.
- Your happiness or pain is determined by your children.
- You are invasive - you need to know everything about what your children think and do.

If you identify with one or more of these symptoms, you might be enmeshed with your children.

### **Consequences for your children of you being enmeshed with them:**

- They may grow up feeling responsible for others' feelings while ignoring responsibility for their own. They might feel selfish if they take care of themselves, rather than you, becoming compliant and disconnected from themselves.
- They may use you as their role model - making others responsible for their feelings, rather than being self-responsible.
- They may feel invaded and controlled by you and withdraw, resist, or act out in anger. As adults, they may have a hard time taking responsibility for themselves.
- They will likely have problems in their adult relationships, both work and personal - being a taker, a caretaker, withdrawn, angry and/or resistant.

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- They might feel lost and empty inside as a result of not learning how to take responsibility for their own feelings.

As a parent, it is vitally important that you have a sense of passion and purpose in your life, separate from your children. And it is vitally important that you learn to define your own sense of worth, rather than making your children's behavior responsible for this. It is way too big a burden for children to be the center of your life. There is way too much pressure on them to act right, perform right, and/or look right, so you feel that you are okay. Defining your worth through your children makes them feel trapped in being what you want them to be, rather than being themselves. If you do not have work, hobbies or other interests that are important to you, then you might be making your children your purpose in life, and you might be making them responsible for your feelings of self-worth.

Your children need you to be a role model of taking loving care of yourself - of defining your own worth and taking responsibility for your own feelings of pain and joy. They need to see you as a productive member of society - whether it is through your work, volunteer work, or creative activities and hobbies. They need to feel free to be themselves and follow their own path, without feeling that they will hurt or disappoint you. They need to know that they can come to you with their fears, questions, doubts and dilemmas, and that you will be there to help them find their way, rather than imposing your way on them. They need to feel your love and support for who they are, rather than who you think they should be.

You will end up with a far better relationship with your children if you learn how to make yourself happy and define your own worth, rather than make your children responsible for you. As adults, they will continue to want to spend time with you if you are your own person, but if they feel obligated to be with you, they might resist.

If you are an enmeshed parent, do yourself and your children a huge favor and start learning to take responsibility for your own happiness and pain through your own Inner Bonding practice.

## **Are You Addicted to Your Children?**

By Dr. Margaret Paul

**Are you using your children as a way to fill up your own emptiness, which is not being filled in healthy ways? Find out in this article if you are using your children addictively and how Inner Bonding can heal this.**

Is it possible that you are using your children addictively?

Anything that you use to get love, avoid pain, and fill up inner emptiness can become an addiction - even your children! If your children are your whole life - if you don't have a strong spiritual connection with a personal source of love and guidance, as well as other relationships and interests that you are passionate about, you might be using your children to fill an empty place within you.

If you don't have a partner, or your relationship with your partner is not fulfilling to you, and you don't have deeply connected and meaningful friendships, then you might be using your kids as your major emotional connection. If you don't have hobbies, or work that is compelling and fulfilling to you, you might be using your children to give meaning to your life. If you don't have a daily spiritual practice that brings love and comfort to your soul, you might be using your children to fill this need.

If this is what you are doing, it is not good for your children. It is a huge burden on children to be responsible for your loneliness and sense of purpose. Children who feel this responsibility often become caretakers, giving themselves up to take care of a parent. On the other hand, a child burdened with this responsibility may rebel and distance from the parent, spending less and less time at home to avoid the burden of the parent's emptiness.

I grew up as an only child with a mother who had nothing fulfilling in her life - other than me. Her whole focus was on me, and because I couldn't possibly fill her up in the way she needed to be filled, she was often angry at me. I became a good little girl, a good caretaker of my mother, but the result was that I was a nervous and unhappy child, and wanted to be away from my house as much as possible.

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Our children need to be a part of our life, not our whole life. We need to role-model for them what it looks like to take personal responsibility for filling ourselves up. We need to show them what it looks like to take responsibility for making ourselves happy, rather than relying on them for our happiness. Your children want to know that they are important to you, but not so important that your wellbeing is dependent upon them. You might want to explore the following questions to see if you may be using your children addictively:

- Do you have a solid spiritual practice that fills you with a sense of peace and gives meaning to your life?
- Are you expressing your particular talents in a way that feels meaningful and productive to you and gives you a sense of fulfillment?
- Do you have fulfilling emotional connections with other adults - a partner, other family members or friends?

If you answered "yes" to these, then you are probably not using your children addictively.

- Do you feel bored and useless when your children are not around? Is it your children that give your life meaning?
- Is your sense of worth attached to your children's achievements? Do you tend to take it personally if one of your children has a problem?
- Are you over-involved in your children's lives?
- Are you overly sensitive if one of our children is angry or distant? Do you find yourself trying to pacify your children rather than set appropriate limits, in order to avoid their rejection?
- Did you choose to have children to share the fullness of your love, or did you have children in the hopes of getting love from them?

If you answered "yes" to one or more of these, then there is a good possibility that you are using your children addictively. If this is the case, the best thing you can do for yourself and your children is to start a devoted Inner Bonding practice, look for meaningful ways of expressing your talents, and develop emotional connection and support from other adults.

## **A Problem With Today's Parenting**

Margaret Paul, Ph.D.

**Many parents try to be better parents than their parents were, yet their children grow up feeling lost and empty. Discover why in this article.**

There was an interesting article in The Atlantic, entitled "How to Land Your Kid in Therapy: Why the obsession with our kids' happiness may be dooming them to unhappy adulthoods. A therapist and mother reports."

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/07/how-to-land-your-kid-in-therapy/8555/>



The article is about the way that many parents focus much of their energy on being there for their children, but their children end up feeling lost and empty.

One of the issues I've written about extensively is that half of good parenting is being there for our children, and the other half is being

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there for ourselves. This article says nothing about parents becoming loving role models of personal responsibility for filling their own emptiness. In fact, the parents who are obsessed with their kids' happiness are likely addicted to filling themselves up through their children - not a healthy situation.

This article validates what Inner Bonding is all about - learning how to take responsibility for your own feelings. The problem with these lost adults is that their parents always took responsibility for them, rather than role-modeling how to fill themselves up.

Feeling lost and empty is the result of the lack of real love. As the cartoon drawing shows, these kids received an abundance of love from their parents. But they never learned how to fill themselves with love through a personal source of spiritual guidance. They never learned how to access their own higher self to guide them in what is loving to them, so they end up feeling lost.

I was just like these parents for many of the years that my children were growing up. Because my parents were never emotionally there for me with love, understanding, compassion and caring, I vowed to give that kind of caring attention to my children. And I did. The problem was that I was not giving it to myself, so I was not teaching my children to give it to themselves. Instead, I was teaching them that someone else was responsible for making them happy.

Fortunately, we created Inner Bonding while my children were adolescents, so they got some of the role-modeling before leaving home. It was not an easy transition for me or for them, to go from caretaking them - taking responsibility for their feelings - to taking responsibility for my feelings. But it was one the best things I ever did for my children.

Are you at least as focused on being there for your own feelings as you are on being there for your children's feelings? If not, are you willing to learn how to take responsibility for your feelings, so that they learn how to take responsibility for theirs? Truly, this is one of the best gifts you can give to your children.

Far too many of the people I work with say the exact same thing that is in the cartoon: "I **LOVE** my parents. I've had a **GREAT** childhood! I've got a **GOOD** job! So why do I feel so **LOST?**" They are very confused about this.

The first thing I ask them is, "How did your parents treat themselves?" The response might be something like, "My mother put herself aside for my father, taking care of his every need. My father worked hard and came home and watched TV all evening. My father was lost without my mother and died six months after my mother died of breast cancer," or, "My mother was addicted to food and my father was addicted to beer."

"Did you ever see either of them taking responsibility for their own feelings?" I ask.

"No."

This is the issue. If you don't want your children to grow up feeling lost and empty, turning to addictions and having relationship problems, then do your own inner work and become a role model of personal responsibility for your own joy.