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Family Focus Parent-Child Boundaries

By Margie Ryerson, MFT



Margie Ryerson, MFT, is a marriage and family therapist in Orinda and Walnut Creek. Contact her at 925-376-9323 or margierye@yahoo.com. She is the author of *Treat Your Partner Like a Dog: How to Breed a Better Relationship* and *Appetite for Life: Inspiring Stories of Recovery from Anorexia, Bulimia, and Compulsive Overeating*.

relationships with both male and female friends have been short-lived and problematic. She never developed the skills necessary to sustain close relationships. After all, her mother essentially did all the work for her by providing constant companionship and intimacy in their own relationship. They call themselves best friends, they travel together, and they are very happy in a sense. But one needs to ask whether or not this co-dependent relationship is ultimately best for Julia, and whether Diana's rather selfish and short-sighted mothering is allowing her daughter to thrive.

- I first met "Lilly" when she was 16 and came to family therapy with her parents. Lilly was being treated for bulimia by a colleague who referred the family to me. Both of her parents were extremely permissive and allowed Lilly, their only child, to treat them rudely and to avoid consequences for her behavior. Both parents told me that above all, they wanted to have a good relationship with Lilly. While they knew that setting boundaries for Lilly was necessary, they failed over time to follow through in their efforts and after six months abandoned therapy. Lilly proceeded to go on a long spree of out-of-control behavior: cutting classes, experimenting with hardcore drugs, promiscuity, and shoplifting before her parents saw the need to change their strategy. We worked together for another year on helping them make the shift from parents who enabled Lilly's destructive behavior to ones who guided forcefully but still caringly.

- "Chris" came in at age 17 for treatment of depression. Along with a genetic predisposition to depression, Chris had a father who wanted to be his friend. Chris's dad bought Chris and his friends alcohol and marijuana. Not only that, but his father joined in pool parties with Chris and his friends where they drank and smoked and partied. Chris's mother turned a blind eye to these activities, but she essentially participated as well by not shutting them down. Chris received confusing messages from his parents and not enough effective parenting to help him through his various struggles. Chris's father thought he was being a cool dad and seemed to want to recapture his own youth through Chris. Neither parent understood or supported Chris's underlying emotional needs.

As parents, we need to ask ourselves whether or not we are considering our children's needs above our own. What we think may be loving behavior may actually be doing more harm than good. While we may yearn to feel

"The last step in parental love involves the release of the beloved; the willing cutting of the cord that would otherwise keep the child in a state of emotional dependence." - Lewis Mumford

If you ask most parents today what they want in their relationship with their children, the response is frequently, "I want to have a close relationship" or "I want to be an important part of their lives." Of course they also want to build character, self-reliance, responsibility, and other positive traits in their children. But sometimes the first wish takes precedence over all others in a way that can become distorted.

The goal of being close to one's children is worthy and understandable. (I know because it's my goal too.) It's only when the balance is tipped and parents become too enmeshed with their children that problems can develop. Marriages can be strained if one partner caters more to a child than to a spouse, and the affected child can develop too much dependency on a parent and have difficulty growing up to be self-reliant and confident. In addition, the parent who is overly-involved with the child limits his or her ability to develop a full and well-balanced life.

Here are a few examples of unhealthy parent-child boundaries with all identifying information changed:

- A former neighbor in another state is a wonderful, fun-loving person. When her son was away in college and her daughter was in high school, "Diana" discovered her husband was having an affair with a co-worker. Unfortunately, Diana didn't keep the details of this affair from their daughter. Instead she leaned on "Julia" for support, thus placing Julia in a difficult position. Diana and her husband divorced a few years later. Julia attended a local college and lived at home until recently; at age 28 she moved into her own condo close to her mother's. Julia's

needed and valued by those we love best, one of the best gifts we can give our children is the ability to function effectively and happily without us. If they see that we are happy and fulfilled, they will be better able to address the task of figuring out their own lives.

Reach the reporter at: margieryr@yahoo.com

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