

Breaking the Parental Grip: Coping with Overcontrolling Parents

by Dr. Michael Obsatz

During infancy and childhood, children need their parent's love, attention, support, and guidance. They are being formed and look to parents as role models for how to cope in the world. It is natural for parents of small children to control them since the parents don't want their children to harm themselves. Parents keep track of young children, so they don't run out in the street, burn themselves with matches, or take unhealthy risks.

As children mature, they usually want to become more autonomous and make more of their own choices. They find others who can act as role models grandparents, teachers, uncles, aunts, peers, and family friends. Sometimes, they look to celebrities for mentoring. When children move into adolescence, they begin to differentiate themselves from their parents. They become more their own people, with separate identities. This individuation process is coupled with a need to attach in healthy ways to others. Erik Erikson, a psychologist, believed that young adults move through an identity phase and then an intimacy phase. The nature and order of Erikson's phases have been debated by many, including Carol Gilligan, another psychologist. She believes the focus on identity and individuation is based on male assumptions. For many, intimacy tasks take precedence over identity formation.

However, you look at it, **both identity and intimacy are necessary for healthy adulthood**. One must claim to be one's own self, and seek to find others to connect with emotionally, intellectually, physically, sexually, and spiritually. One defines oneself partly by the people with whom one connects. Intimacy leads to a redefined identity which leads to further intimacy.

Some parents refuse to let their children grow up. They want their children to be dependent upon them even into adulthood. This encouragement for dependency creates a kind of symbiosis, codependency, or enmeshment. Parents feel responsible for their children's happiness and success and believe that such success reflects back on them as effective parents. Some parents want to continue to make all the choices for their young adult children. They want to control their children's choice of a partner, career, hobbies, friendships, lifestyle, religious beliefs, etc. This parental control can be powerfully exerted in the following ways:

- 1. Guilt Parents** could use phrases like, "If you really cared about me, you would... (do whatever I want you to do)."
- 2. Shame and Undermining Parents** can shame children. "You are not capable of making healthy and appropriate choices." "You need my help."
- 3. Threats of abandonment and actual abandonment Parents** can threaten children with "If you marry that person, I'll never speak to you again." Some parents actually leave their children and refuse to see them again.
- 4. Threats of self-destruction Parents** can tell their children that they will suffer or die as a result of an adult child's choices.

Why do parents use overcontrol?

Most parents who try to overcontrol their adult children do so out of fear and low self-esteem. They have been shamed and feel inadequate. They need to control their children to validate their own lives and choices which they don't really feel good about. They believe that by cloning their children in their own image, they will have a continuous connection/obligation with them that will support them in the present as well as in their elderly lives. Basically, they are using their children to feel better about themselves. But ultimately, it does not work, and children cannot make up for their parent's shame and feelings of inadequacy. This frustrates the parents and makes them try to control themselves even more.

How do adult children respond to parental overcontrol?

1. Many feel angry and resentful. Some become depressed and suicidal. Some turn to addictions to numb themselves out.

2. Some go along with it and give away their power to their parents. They become exactly what their parents want them to become marry the parent's choice, take the job the parents would choose, etc. They may be passive-aggressive or depressed. Some of them find ways to diffuse their anger through substance abuse or other addictions.

3. Some adult children accept some of their parent's wishes for them and refuse others. They compromise and work it out.

4. Others rebel and make their own choices. They shake off parental control and do their own thing. They may move thousands of miles away from their parents. In some extreme cases, they choose to live the exact opposite way that their parents wished them to live. They frequently risk parental abandonment and lack of acceptance. Some of these adult children avoid their parents. Some are shunned and disowned by their parents. Others become angry at their parent's limiting control.

5. Still others, pretend to go along with their parents, and have a secret life of their own they don't tell their parents about. They have secrets from their parents.

6. Still others are able to negotiate and convince their parents that they are adults and are entitled to live their own lives. Parents re-adjust their expectations, let go of the controls, and it works out well.

Parents have the power to enhance or destroy their children's lives. They can validate and appreciate their children or cripple with their shame and guilt. Many adults have been so wounded by their parents that they live lives of pain and humiliation. Parents who do not look at their own emotional wounds are likely to inflict them on their children. Overcontrolling is one way to abuse and hurt one's children.

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