
Enmeshment in the American Family

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The central thesis of this article is that the ideology and structure of the U.S. family generates excessive parental dependence on children for validation; self-esteem; and, in some cases, intimacy and that this dependence is the cornerstone of enmeshed parent-child relationships. The article concludes with a discussion of alternative approaches to child rearing. The empirical base for the analysis is the author's clinical experience and in-depth life-history interviews with 48 Caucasian men and women of diverse ages and classes.

Family enmeshment, the tendency to engage in overly involved, overly close emotional relationships, is a standard feature of many American families. Sociologists lend abundant support to this observation. Although they may not use the term *enmeshment*, they present compelling evidence of the wide distribution of an intense, highly involved, highly charged relationship in the dominant form of the American family, typical in the middle class and significant segments of the working class (Harris, 1983; Lasch, 1978; Laslett, 1979; Poster, 1978; Sennett & Cobb, 1973).

Despite the prevalence of enmeshment, feminist clinical theorists have shied away from the topic, primarily because they fear that such analyses end up blaming the mother. The practice