

# Emotional Incest

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*Edited by Susan Peabody*

There are three types of incest: overt, covert, and emotional. Overt incest is sexual contact by a relative. Covert incest is sexual energy without touching (peering, inappropriate sexual talk, coming into the bathroom, etc.) Emotional incest is when the roles are reversed. A parent is lonely and turns to the child for support. The child becomes the adult emotionally, and the adult becomes the child. The parent and child are emotionally enmeshed. There are no healthy boundaries. They used to say "smothered" now they say emotional incest.

Emotional incest may seem less traumatic than other forms of incest, but it leaves us with a fear of emotional intimacy and unable to engage in a deep connection with an available person. This can leave to love addiction and loving an unavailable person. It can also leave us ambivalent about love. Craving love, and even seeking it out, but also avoiding it.

I am offering this article by Robert Burney, with his permission, to help people in recovery who have this issue:

Consider a scenario where mother is crying in her bedroom and her three year old toddles into the room. To the child it looks as if mom is dying. The child is terrified and says, "I love you mommy!" Mom looks at her child. She smiles. She says, "You are my wonderful little boy/girl. Come here and give mommy a hug. You make mommy feel so good."

A touching scene? No. The child has just received the message that he/she has the power to save mommy's life. That the child has power over, and therefore responsibility for, mommy's feelings. This is emotional abuse, and sets up an emotionally incestuous relationship in which the child feels responsible for the parent's emotional needs.

A healthy parent would explain to the child that it is all right for mommy to cry, that it is healthy and good for people to cry when they feel sad or hurt. An emotionally healthy parent would show the child that it is okay to have the full range of emotions, all the feelings: sadness and hurt, anger and fear, Joy and happiness, etc.”

Emotional incest occurs because some parents do not know how to have healthy boundaries. It can occur with one or both parents—same sex or opposite sex. It occurs because the parents are emotionally dishonest with themselves and cannot get their emotional needs met by their spouse or other adults. John Bradshaw refers to this dynamic as a parent making the child their “surrogate spouse.”

This type of abuse can happen in a variety of ways. On one end of the spectrum the parent emotionally “dumps” on the child. This occurs when a parent talks about adult issues and feelings to a child as if they were a peer. Sometimes both parents will dump on a child in a way that puts the child in the middle of disagreements between the parents—with each complaining about the other.

On the other end of the spectrum is the family where no one talks about their feelings. In this case, though no one is talking about feelings, there are still emotional undercurrents present in the family which the child senses and feels some responsibility for—even if they haven't got a clue as to what the tension, anger, fear, or hurt are all about.

Here is an example of healthy boundaries from one of my support groups. There was a little boy who by four-years old had been going to twelve-step meetings with his mother for two years. At a CoDA meeting one day he was sitting on a man's lap only six feet away from where his mother was sharing and crying. He didn't even bother to look up when his mother started crying. The man, who was more concerned than the little boy, said to him, "Your mommy's crying because she feels sad." The little boy looked up, glanced over at his mother and said, "Yea, she's getting better," and went back to playing. He knew that it was okay for mom to cry and that it was not his job to fix her. That little boy, at four years old, already had healthier boundaries than most adults—because his mother was in recovery working on getting healthier herself. The best thing that we can do for any of our loved ones is to focus on our own healing.

In recovery, we are breaking the cycles of generations of emotional dishonesty and abuse. We now have the tools and knowledge we need to heal our wounds and change the human condition. We are Spiritual Beings having a human experience. We are perfect in our spiritual essence. We are perfectly where we are supposed to be on our spiritual path, and we will never be able to do human perfectly. We are unconditionally loved and we are going to get to get better.