Should Parents Be Licensed?

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Let's talk about separation anxiety.

Ours, not theirs.

Theirs is a well-known, common and entirely expectable experience. Kids can become anxious at any age when the source of their emotional security –a parent- is distant or removed. The first day of school. Leaving for a new summer camp. Even just falling asleep at night. We help our kids to manage their separation anxiety with patient reassurance, by providing tangible transitional objects that help to communicate our love in our absence and through firm insistence that the separation is necessary, that they will be fine and that we'll be there for them when it's over.

But ours? Healthy parents don't rely on their children as a source of emotional security. To do so would be a destructive form of role reversal known as "adultification" or "parentification." The adultified or parentified child may feel good about the special secrets she (or he) shares with mommy (or daddy), but that child is being deprived of the opportunity to be a child; to grow in the security of a parents' nurturance.

No, healthy parents find emotional security in healthy *<i>adult<i>* relationships. We get our emotional fuel from intimate partners and caring co-workers, from trusted neighbors and valued clergy, from a high school best friend never forgotten, a skilled therapist or an adult sibling. As healthy parents, we know that the emotional fuel that everyone needs must flow in one direction: from parent to child. We know that depending upon our children for our emotional fuel is a recipe for unhealthy outcomes; that it is, in fact, a form of emotional abuse.

So what does that pit-of-the-stomach emptiness, that aimless, purposeless, now-what feeling mean when a child leaves for a month at camp, for a summer with a distant relative or to college hundreds of miles away?

Admit it: After the tears at parting have dried, there's an initial relief. Parents celebrate the quiet with a mix of glee and embarrassment. Some of us busy ourselves with cleaning and organizing. Emptying drawers that could never be touched while the child was home, moving furniture and cleaning rugs and painting walls in a kind of sequel to the "nesting" process so common among pregnant parents.

Some of us take the opportunity to rediscover an intimate relationship that had begun to become stale, to wine and dine and romance again like long before. Some reinvest in work activities or abandoned hobbies. Some fill the void with substances and still others to fall into depression.

More than just empty-nest, this is adult separation anxiety. It's not a loss of emotional fuel the way that a child experiences separation anxiety. It's a loss of identity, a challenge to the way in which we define ourselves. In this sense, adult separation anxiety may be similar to what some of us experience over the loss of a job or the loss of a particular skill. It's akin to what the man who works his entire life for one company goes through when that company closes down, or what the woman who is known for her stitching experiences when arthritis limits her productivity. Adult separation anxiety is less like the child's loss of felt-safety and more like the recent amputee's experience of "who am I now?"

This is not to say that job loss, the progressive limitations associated with illness and aging or the trauma of the loss of a limb are in the least bit trivial. Each is

undoubtedly traumatic in its own way. But all three –like the parents' experience of a long term separation from a child- challenge us to redefine who we are, how we fit in and how we value ourselves.

Unlike these other trauma, adult separation anxiety tends be subtle and confusing. The loss of a job, a skill or a limb is obvious and the resulting upset can be pinned on an easily identifiable cause. The strong emotions that the man or woman experiencing these trauma may have will be more or less acceptable to partners, friends and neighbors. But the parent who has just sent a child off to college? Where's the trauma?

It can be astonishing to discover how much changing diapers and schlepping to playdates, helping with homework and chaperoning class trips and reading bedtime stories and waiting up at curfew and doing laundry and arguing and hugging and all of the billion other bits of parenting can become part of who you are. The process is so gradual and so subtle that we commonly don't realize its happened until the child is away for an extended period and the "what-now?" hits home.

Thursday night? "I've gotta pick him up from hockey practice … oh yeah …"

Time for supper? How many places do you set at the table?

Grocery shopping? No need to pick up that salsa she enjoys.

Bedtime? You start to check in his room to see that he's asleep and discover it empty, embarrassed that you forgot. Then you wonder how he's managing on his own. How could he possibly get to sleep without you there to settle him down.

There's a trap here, you know. The parent who doesn't understand this experience or can't keep it in perspective, the mom or dad who emphasizes their own

emptiness and longing and neediness to the absent child in letters and calls, via IM and TXT, risks guilting the child into giving up his or her natural and necessary independence to care for the adult. The parent who obviously falls apart when the child is away, who is drunk or drugged or ill, might communicate the that, “I can’t manage without you!”

And so as healthy parents, we struggle to understand the experience of adult separation anxiety, we work to fill the void that is left when the house is suddenly quiet, the phone has stopped ringing and no one needs a ride anywhere by turning to other adults. We help our newly-independent kids to focus on themselves without guilt for what they’ve left behind and we encourage their steps toward greater autonomy as we know we should, untainted by our own adult needs.

In this way, parent and child each slowly reinvent themselves over time. Eventually, both child and adult separation anxiety resolve. The child’s need for adult nurturance begins to shift toward peers and mentors and intimate partners outside of home (but never entirely away from it), and our identity needs are patched and filled in our own unique ways. This is how growing occurs; how when the child comes home after weeks or months or years away, we begin to discover and define a more mature kind of parent-child relationship.

------------------------------- Parenting Pointer -------------------------------

Adult separation anxiety happens bit-by-bit all along the bumpy road of child development, from the first time you leave her with a babysitter, to the first days apart in kindergarten, through her first sleep-away and class trip and summer camp. Across

these many tiny but momentous private occasions, parent and child pace themselves, each learning new coping skills and greater independence. But development, like so much else, is inevitably a process that moves two steps forward and then one step back.

We expect that our newly independent kids will come crawling and crying home at one time or another, emotionally exhausted and ready to be nurtured all over again. In fact, who among us as parents haven't wished for the same at least now and again? The chance to throw off the responsibilities of adulthood at least briefly in favor of curling up in our own preferred caregivers' lap?

These brief steps backward down the staircase of development are necessary and natural. We must be careful to take them in stride, to nurture and reassure and then send our kids back out there to practice their new skills some more, never taking these moments to confirm our selfish and immature hopes and fears, "I knew you couldn't do it!" or, "I couldn't manage without you either!"

And the child whose age-appropriate steps toward autonomy stall out? The son or daughter whose separation anxiety prevents them from growing and enjoying along with their peers? Make sure that your own adult separation anxiety isn't complicating the situation and then check in with a trusted professional. Start with the pediatrician or PCP, the school counselor, a familiar and value clergyperson or child-centered psychotherapist.