

# Enmeshment

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**Enmeshment** is a concept in psychology and psychotherapy introduced by Salvador Minuchin (1921–2017) to describe families where personal boundaries are diffused, sub-systems undifferentiated, and over-concern for others leads to a loss of autonomous development.<sup>[1]</sup> Enmeshed in parental needs, trapped in a discrepant role function,<sup>[2]</sup> a child may lose their capacity for self-direction;<sup>[3]</sup> their own distinctiveness, under the weight of "psychic incest";<sup>[4]</sup> and, if family pressures increase, may end up becoming the identified patient or family scapegoat.<sup>[5]</sup>

Enmeshment was also used by John Bradshaw to describe a state of cross-generational bonding within a family, whereby a child (normally of the opposite sex) becomes a surrogate spouse for their mother or father.<sup>[6]</sup>

The term is sometimes applied to engulfing codependent relationships,<sup>[7]</sup> where an unhealthy symbiosis is in existence.<sup>[8]</sup>

For the toxically enmeshed child, the adult's carried feelings may be the only ones they know, outweighing and eclipsing their own.<sup>[9]</sup>

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## See also

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- Atlas personality
- Co-rumination
- Covert incest
- Cross-generational sexual relationships
- Double bind
- Dysfunctional family
- Family nexus
- Folie à deux
- Harold Searles
- Parentification
- Stockholm syndrome
- Structural family therapy

## References

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1. H. & L. Goldberg, *Family Therapy: An Overview* (2008) pp. 244, 467.
2. Virginia Satir, *Peoplemaking* (1983) p. 167
3. R. C. Schwartz, *Internal Family Systems Therapy* (1997) p. 162
4. Robert Bly, *Iron John* (1991) pp. 170, 185–7.
5. Goldberg, p. 239
6. John Bradshaw, *Reclaiming Virtue* (2009) p. 390
7. Bradshaw, p. 272
8. R. Abell, *Own Your Own Life* (1977) pp. 119–22
9. Terence Real, *I Don't Want to Talk About It* (1997) pp. 206, 360.

## Further reading

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- Robin Skynner, *One Flesh, Separate Persons* (London 1976)

## External links

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- Enmeshment: Symptoms and Causes (<http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/enmeshment-symptoms-and-causes-125738708.html>) Archived (<https://web.archive.org/web/20120626002926/http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/enmeshment-symptoms-and-causes-125738708.html>) 2012-06-26 at the Wayback Machine

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