

Lindsay C. Gibson, PsyD

Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents: How to Heal from Difficult, Rejecting, or Self-involved Parents

Made by Blinkist



These key insights in blinks were written by a team of experts at Blinkist. We screen the world of nonfiction to choose the very best books. Then, we read them deeply and transform them into this concise format that brings you the most inspiring ideas from the text.

Maybe these blinks will inspire you to dig deeper, or maybe they're enough to start you thinking and then on to something new. However you read blinks, we hope they help you become an even brighter you.

What's in it for me? A guide to healing childhood trauma caused by emotionally immature parents.

Although society is accustomed to the idea that parents are supposed to be more mature than their children, this doesn't always prove to be true.

Sometimes, highly sensitive children become much more emotionally capable than their parents in just a few short years of life. What happens when emotionally immature parents lack the skills necessary to meet their children's needs?

The result is a profound sense of neglect and loneliness that continues into adulthood. The good news is that these deep emotional wounds can be healed.

This Blink to *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents* explores the ideas of clinical psychologist Lindsay C. Gibson. We'll pull back the curtain on a syndrome that is very common – but rarely talked about. We'll take a deep dive into the characteristics of emotionally immature parents and discuss healthier methods for effective communication. Finally, we'll discover how to recognize emotional maturity, break free from negative thought patterns, and take a step closer toward a more positive life.

A lack of emotional intimacy results in profound loneliness for both children and adults.

Before we begin, take a moment to think about your childhood. What words would you use to describe your experience? How do you feel when you think back to that time?

If you grew up with an emotionally immature parent, there's a good chance that you have lingering feelings of anger, betrayal, and loneliness. You may even feel uneasy or ashamed for feeling this way.

True emotional intimacy means that you feel safe enough to communicate your deepest feelings to someone. It is a profoundly fulfilling part of human relationships that makes us feel seen for who we truly are. Without it, both children and adults can experience deep feelings of loneliness.

Emotional loneliness can be an isolating experience, especially when it stems from childhood neglect. If one or both of your parents were not mature enough to provide adequate emotional support, you probably felt the effects – even if you didn't understand what was happening at the time.

When we don't receive the emotional connections we need as children, we can grow into adults with a lack of security and an overall weak sense of self. While invisible on the outside, these wounds can be just as painful as any physical injury.

What most people don't know is that these feelings of pain and loneliness are actually a good thing. They are our body's way of sending us the message that we desire an emotional connection. In fact, we have a strong biological need to have emotional closeness with others.

Throughout human history, being part of a group has always meant security. Even our earliest ancestors were more likely to survive when they enjoyed the safety of being close to one another.

Once you begin listening to your emotions instead of pushing them away, you'll be able to form more genuine, authentic connections. Being able to identify the root cause of your emotional loneliness is the first step toward healing.

How to recognize the signs of emotional immaturity

If you've gotten this far, chances are you suspect that one or both of your parents were emotionally immature. But how can you know for sure?

After all, under a significant amount of stress or exhaustion, anyone can lose emotional control or become temporarily impulsive. What sets truly emotionally immature parents apart is the pattern of their behavior. When someone is not fully equipped to deal with complicated emotions, they tend to exhibit certain negative characteristics repeatedly.

To make matters worse, most emotionally immature behaviors are unconscious – the parent often has no awareness of how their actions have affected their children.

Although there are different types of emotionally immature parents, they all tend to share a similar personality profile – one centered around narcissism, insensitivity, and a limited tolerance for genuine emotional intimacy.

With truly emotionally immature parents, communication can be very difficult and may even feel impossible at times. Your interactions might leave you feeling completely shut down and invalidated. One of the most exhausting aspects of their personality is that they are unwilling to put in the emotional work needed to maintain a healthy relationship.

These kinds of parents don't have the self-confidence to admit that they were wrong and will resist fixing their own mistakes. Ironically, emotionally immature people crave attention for their own needs but aren't likely to respond to the needs of others.

Emotionally immature parents will also seek to form *enmeshment* rather than intimacy. Enmeshment occurs when two people find their identity through an intense, codependent relationship. This can also manifest as “playing favorites” with their children.

If you ever felt like your parent treated your sibling better than you, it’s likely that the “favorite” sibling was also emotionally immature. Low levels of emotional maturity can pull people into a relationship of mutual enmeshment.

Last, because they lack a solid sense of self, emotionally immature parents will usually demand that their children either mirror their own harmful behaviors or play a role that they deem appropriate. They thrive on the idea of each family member having a specific role because it helps them oversimplify complex issues, making them easier to deal with.

The four different styles of emotionally immature parenting

Hopefully by now, you feel a bit more confident identifying the characteristics that all emotionally immature parents share. Armed with this information, we can now dive a bit deeper and discuss the four main types of emotionally immature parents.

The first type is the *emotional* parent. Ironically, these kinds of parents are ruled by their feelings – often swinging wildly between being over-involved and completely withdrawing from their children’s lives. The most important characteristic of this type is that they often exhibit frightening levels of instability.

Often overwhelmed by their own anxieties, they see small problems as a complete disaster. This means that the entire family has to walk on eggshells around them, always careful to avoid triggering an emotional blowup.

The second type is the *driven* parent. This personality type is obsessively goal-oriented and perpetually busy. They are on a constant quest for perfection, which includes every detail of their lives – even their children.

Although they rarely show any true empathy, these kinds of parents enjoy having complete control over their children’s lives.

The third type is the *passive* parent. As you might have guessed, these parents employ a laissez-faire style of engagement. This tends to make them less harmful than the other three types, but they still come with their own set of negative impacts.

For instance, since passive parents try their hardest to avoid anything that might upset them, they often willingly take a backseat to a more dominant partner. This can sometimes lead to physical and emotional abuse for both them and their children.

The fourth and final type is the *rejecting* parent. Whether mild or severe, these parents don't enjoy any level of emotional intimacy. This makes their tolerance for other people's needs nonexistent.

As a result, their interactions with other family members usually consist of getting angry, commanding others, or completely isolating themselves. In fact, these parents' behaviors make you wonder why they even had children in the first place.

Although each type of parent undermines their child's sense of security with different behaviors, all four styles give their children unstable emotional support and show very little empathy for them.

As we learned earlier, this lack of emotional security can have devastating effects on children that follow them into adulthood. In the next section, we'll discuss the ways that children learn to cope with these negative impacts.

Coping mechanisms: Internalizers vs externalizers

There are two distinct personality types that can arise from an emotionally neglectful childhood – *internalizers* and *externalizers*. Determining which style you've adopted is an important part of healing. So what exactly sets these coping mechanisms apart?

A useful analogy to distinguish between the two types is to think of them as appliances. Externalizers draw their energy from being plugged into the grid, while internalizers come with batteries included.

Externalizers tend to be highly reactive and take action before they really have a chance to think. They outwardly display their depression, anxiety, or pain and often act impulsively to distract themselves from their own issues. Not willing to be self-reflective, externalizers usually seek support from others – and also blame them for their problems.

On the other hand, internalizers look for solutions within themselves. Since they depend on their own inner resources, internalizers may seem to need less attention – although in reality, it's the opposite. As they are highly sensitive and naturally perceptive, this personality type can't help but notice when they don't have a genuine emotional connection with their parents.

As with most things in life, finding a balance is key. Externalizers can benefit from learning to find a sense of control within themselves. Internalizers need to learn how to be more comfortable seeking help from others.

Whether they internalize or externalize their feelings, most children of emotionally immature parents create healing fantasies about how their lives might be better someday. These fantasies are hopeful scenarios about a future where they might finally be loved and cared for.

If the child's true identity is rejected by their parents, they may also develop a *role-self* – a part to play that secures their place in the family. For example, a naturally curious and inquisitive child might take on a more quiet, passive role in order to appease their parent.

Children create these roles and fantasies to help them survive a difficult childhood. However, this only leads to a sense of disappointment when, as adults, they can no longer keep up the facade.

In the next section, we'll discuss a healthier approach to dealing with an emotionally immature parent. Once you learn to look beyond your childhood hopes and cultural beliefs, you'll be able to see your parents in a new light. Instead of falling victim to their emotional sabotage, you'll gain the ability to protect your own emotions and preserve your individuality.

How to use the maturity awareness approach

As children, it can be difficult to see our parents objectively. After all, aren't we taught that our parents are supposed to be our heroes? Fortunately, as we grow into adulthood, we gain the freedom to assess whether or not our parents really gave us the care we needed.

The first step to gaining emotional freedom is to learn how to become observational rather than reactive. To do this, you'll need to approach any interaction from a place of calm centeredness. There are many ways to do this. You can take deep breaths, tense and relax your muscles, or even imagine calming scenery.

Next, you need to think like a scientist. If it helps, you can even pretend you're completing a field study. Mentally take note of how your parent is responding to you. What is their body language like? Do they seem calm or irritated? Are they actually listening to you, or are they just trying to appease you? Do you recognize any of the emotionally immature behaviors we talked about earlier?

After reaching a state of objectivity, you can begin to employ what Gibson calls the three-step *maturity awareness approach*.

The first step is to express yourself and let go. Tell your parent what you want to say, but don't worry about controlling the outcome. It doesn't matter how they react to you – what matters is that you express your true feelings.

The second step is to focus on the interaction, not on the relationship itself. Set a goal of what you want to achieve from the conversation. For example, you might say, "I want to tell my mother how I really feel without getting upset."

Step three is to manage instead of engage. Engaging with emotionally immature people can be an exhausting experience. Instead, simply try to manage the interaction. For example, you may need to redirect the conversation if your parent tries to deflect or steer it in another direction. Stay polite, but be aware that you may need to address the problem many times before you get an answer.

The key point here is to free yourself from the obligation of constantly trying to “fix” your relationship with your parent. Remember, you can’t control your parent’s behavior – you can only control how you react to it.

Recognizing emotionally mature behaviors can help you seek out healthier relationships.

Adult children of emotionally immature parents tend to grow up believing that a healthy, rewarding relationship is too good to be true. Hidden behind this thought is the fear that no one will ever love them for who they really are.

Reclaiming your true self can help you learn to finally interact with your parents in a constructive manner. Another thing you can do? Hone your ability to recognize a truly emotionally *mature* person. This will help you create mutually satisfying relationships beyond your immediate family.

So how can you know if someone is emotionally mature? What characteristics should you be looking for?

The most important traits of an emotionally mature person are that they are realistic and reliable. They see problems and try to find a real solution instead of fixating on how they think things should be. Because they have such a strong sense of self-awareness, they're unlikely to surprise their loved ones with unexpected inconsistencies.

Another sign of emotional maturity is the ability to laugh at yourself. Mature people are not easily offended and are quick to joke about their own shortcomings. They understand that they aren't perfect – and won't expect you to be either. Willing to be self-reflective, these kinds of people will put in the work to change their behavior if needed.

Emotionally mature people are also typically flexible, even-tempered, and truthful. They are genuinely interested in your unique inner experience and want to get to know you.

Finally, emotionally mature people are enjoyable to be around! This isn't to say that they're happy all the time, but they have an overall positive vibe that makes you want to spend time with them.

When dating or seeking out new friendships as an adult, it can be tempting to fall back into the old, harmful patterns we developed as children. However, being able to recognize emotionally mature behaviors can lead to the kind of healthy and satisfying relationship you've always wanted.

Final summary

Growing up with an emotionally immature parent has devastating effects on children, which follow them into adulthood. Whether they internalize or externalize these negative feelings, children often develop harmful coping mechanisms that only make the problem worse. As an adult, you have the opportunity to finally break free from these old, destructive thought patterns.

When you learn to recognize emotionally mature behavior and embrace your true self, you can begin to heal. Not only will you be able to interact with your parents in a more objective way, but you'll be able to create relationships with people who will finally care for you in the way that you need.

Nice work! You're all done with this one.

We publish new books every week at blinkist.com.

Come and see – there's so much more to learn.

Inspired to read the full book?

[Get it here.](#)

Copyright © 2014 by Blinks Labs GmbH. All rights reserved.