



Understanding Enabling

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WHAT IS ENABLING?

Enabling is defined as:

1. To provide with the means or opportunity
2. To make possible, practical, or easy

The difference between helping and unhealthy enabling is:

Helping: Doing for someone what they cannot do for themselves or teaching them the skills necessary to do things for themselves

Unhealthy Enabling: Doing for someone what they can and should do for themselves

How can you tell the difference?

Helping usually involves *you* doing things in line with your values; unhealthy enabling involves *you* doing things that are not consistent with your values.

In other words:

“To thine own self be true.”

QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU RECOGNIZE YOUR ENABLING BEHAVIORS

- Do you find yourself worrying about other people in ways that consume your time, or do you find yourself trying to come up with solutions to their problems rather than letting them do the solving?
- Do you find yourself afraid for others, convinced that they “cannot handle” a relationship or situation without “falling apart?”
- Have you ever given others money even though you know it will go to things you disagree with, or talked to someone “for them” as a way of reducing their pain?
- Do you feel protective of the others, even though they are adults and capable of taking care of their own lives?
- Do you ever wish others in your loved one’s lives would change their behavior or attitudes to make things easier for your loved one?
- Have you ever rescued your adult loved ones from the consequences of their behavior (bailed out of jail, paid legal fees, paid bills, loaned money, called in sick to work or school for them?)
- Do you ever feel manipulated by others but ignore or deny your feelings?

Adapted from: Overindulged Children: A Parent’s Guide to Mentoring, Dr. James A. Fogarty

COMMON BELIEFS IN ENABLING FAMILIES

Which of these have you believed? Have your actions matched your values?

1. Constant Happiness

Enabling families believe that family members should never be in emotional distress. This leads to believing:

- a) If a family member is emotionally uncomfortable other family members must step in to “fix” the situation.
- b) Family members should never experience uncomfortable emotions, including emotions that naturally come with life such as pain, guilt, shame, grief, and longing.
 - ▶ **Result:** People living in such an environment may not develop the ability to tolerate emotional discomfort and may seek harmful ways to alleviate/medicate these feelings when they naturally occur. They may also feel pressure to *act* happy to please others in family.

2. Family Members Should Have Whatever They Want

Enabling people believe that unconditional love means that family members should get whatever they want and do whatever they want. This belief is based in two main concerns:

- a) Difficulty saying no to family. They believe that being a good parent/spouse/child includes buying, giving, leniency, and entertaining.
- b) Difficulty distinguishing between other’s wants (desire for luxuries), and their needs (legitimate desire to love and be loved, affection, honesty, etc).
 - ▶ **Result:** Family members who are given too much (possessions or permission) may become entitled as a result of believing that they ‘deserve’ whatever they want.

3. Family Members Should Be Shielded From Consequences

Enabling people believe that they are supposed to shield their family members from the consequences of their actions as well as the complications of life. This concern is fed by the beliefs:

- a) By fixing the problem or nullifying consequences, people will not experience painful emotions, and will therefore be happy.
- b) Allowing the natural consequences will reflect poorly on other family members, leading to painful emotions or triggering old messages.
 - ▶ **Result:** People may not develop the self-guidance necessary to learn from their mistakes, and thus the self-directed willingness to make appropriate choices. This may also feed shame messages that they can’t take care of themselves.

4. All Decisions Are Open to Negotiation

Enabling parents debate every issue with children, at all ages. Every topic is open for negotiation, even with young children. This creates children who act like little attorneys, debating to get the best deal. This problem intensifies as children become teenagers. Likewise, older family members may question any decision that they do not like, turning every discussion or statement by another family member into a debate.

- ▶ **Result:** People do not learn to submit to legitimate authority, and do not learn to delay gratification.
- ▶ No one in the family feels like they can stand up for their own values without being ready to defend them as though in a court of law.

Who acted like they believed that



1. Constant happiness

- Mom
- Dad
- Kid(s)
- Other family members

3. Family members should be shielded from consequences

- Mom
- Dad
- Kid(s)
- Other family members

2. Family members should have whatever they want

- Mom
- Dad
- Kid(s)
- Other family members

4. All decisions are open to negotiation

- Mom
- Dad
- Kid(s)
- Other family members

WHAT IS A RESCUE?

Who are we really rescuing? Whose needs are we really meeting?

Rescuing is an attempt to save someone from a dangerous situation. It becomes a problem when the rescue is keeping someone from learning what they need to learn, or is keeping them from experiencing the natural consequences of their own actions.

When children are small, it is a parent's job to care for, help, or protect them when they do not have the ability to care for themselves in frightening or dangerous situations. Rescues can range from removing a child from a physically dangerous situation to doing something to soothe a painful emotion. As children mature, rescuing should be replaced with teaching skills that allow children to become adults who can care for themselves physically and emotionally. When family members are adults, they can be treated as adults.

SOME EXAMPLES OF RESCUING

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- Doing something we really don't want to do for another person
- Saying "yes" when we mean "no."
- Doing something for someone that he or she should be doing for himself or herself
- Doing most of the work when our help is requested
- Consistently giving more than we receive in a particular situation
- Fixing people's feelings
- Doing people's thinking for them
- Speaking for another person
- Suffering another's consequences for them
- Solving people's problems for them
- Not asking for what we need, want, and desire