

LIFE CYCLE

PARENT-CHILDREN RELATIONSHIPS CHANGE OVER A LIFESPAN

WORDS: JOANNE WILSON



The Life Cycle of a Mother. Last week we saluted mums for Mother's Day. My article recognised the significant pressure we face in this role, and my fascination with how much this influential relationship can develop and change over a lifespan.

It's no wonder a new mother can be anxious. A child's well-being is totally and completely dependent on its mother. The mother's impact on her child's brain is widespread and profound. She couldn't be more influential during childhood stages. Interestingly, that then decreases as the child reaches adolescence and adulthood. It's quite the role reversal as they can become less prominent and more reliant on their child for advice and support (IT support comes to mind)! As health declines, the mother can become totally dependent on the child for both mental and physical survival. You could say, what goes around comes around as evident in the cycle of a mother. We look at these stages in more detail.

Infancy: Our sense of safety and well-being from a healthy attachment depends on the patterns of interaction with our parents which begins in infancy. As parents respond to and anticipate the baby's needs in their first two years of life, their neurons are connecting to each other. Our early attachment experiences shape this process. When a child experiences this safe connection, they're more likely to approach a wonderful life and its challenges instead of avoiding it. Even the mother's brain is reshaped through a mix of pregnancy-related hormones and the intense sensory and emotional stimulation provided by her newborn.

Toddlers and preschool: Mums then become nurturers and teachers, and guide toddlers towards safe choices. This is particularly important as they become mobile and assertive. They help shape their child's behaviour toward socialisation. The

level of appropriate responsiveness in relation to firm boundaries is also paramount and helps model the child's empathy and knowledge of consequences. The greatest outcome here is a child who is curious, focussed, able to freely play, sometimes self-reliant and cheerful.

School age: As the greater environment and peers broaden the psychosocial and cognitive abilities of the child's world, the parent-child relationship continues to remain the most important influence on their development. It's often natural here that mums have greater freedom to work and juggle their requirement to provide that responsive, attentive, warm and loving environment that maintains firm boundaries. Despite significant change such as divorce, the relationship between the parent is a more important positive factor to the child's psychological development than changes.

Adolescence: Seen traditionally as a time of conflict and chaos, this can be a wonderful

time when mothers enjoy what Clinical Professor, Dr Dan Siegel terms as the "essence" of adolescence. That is, the emotional spark, social engagement, novelty-seeking and creative exploration stage. I notice when there is a positive male and female parental influence here, teens fare best. For single mums, this can take the form of a grandfather, uncle or respected friend. This is also an interesting stage for mothers as they can be transitioning to mid-life around this time. We can see how in the previous stages, the significance of maintaining that secure attachment is imperative.

Adults: Many adults have an active relationship with their parents and now relate to each other as equals. Some parents remain authoritarian but inevitably come to rely on their children as they become physically weaker. This can bring both stress and fulfilment as parents and adult children redefine their relationship. Men are traditionally seen as less communicative, less social but more independent. I've heard of many traditional family situations in recent generations where the wife takes on the matriarchal role as the couple ages.

It seems today that parents are closer to their adult children than in previous generations. We are enjoying a trend where we can enjoy an intimate relationship that is closer and more equal than ever before.

Image: Illustration by www.denisedaffara.com.au/

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