

Through the Lens #1

Launching Time
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Bowen theory has often been likened to a new lens through which to see the human phenomenon. "Thinking systems," for most people, is a different, broader and more accurate way to see what is happening in a relationship system and with individuals as well. It takes into account more of the facts of both individuals and systems. This monthly column will look through that systems lens at specific questions asked by actual people.

This month, the staff of SFSN interviews Dr. Gilbert. In future columns readers are invited to send along their concerns and questions.

Question: Today, kids often seem to be taking longer to get out on their own. How can parents encourage them?

Dr. Gilbert: I think there are several things that help the developmental process along at launching time. Of course, there is a spectrum of kids. Some are ready sooner, and some, later, to be on their own. Then, there is the tightening job market that means less jobs that actually provide a living wage make it harder to get started. But in general, I would think of three areas to which to pay attention:

- One's relationship with the young person
- One's own adult relationships
- Taking a stand if and when appropriate

1. One's relationship with the young person

We, as parents, have been working for a number of years to produce people who are responsible, contributing adults. Sometime, though, we relate to our adult children as though they were at a younger age, when an adult-to-adult relationship is really what is appropriate. Ideal adult relationships are open, equal and separate.

Open means people have an open communication system. Things can be openly discussed, even difficult issues such as death, marriage, and yes, even launching and all it means.

Equal means we don't "parent" them as much as when they were younger. While open to discussion with them, we aren't so ready to have all the answers or tell them what to do. We don't tell them what we think until we hear what they think themselves about a given situation. We see him or her as another adult.

Separate means we maintain boundaries with our offspring. While we don't, as a rule, tell them what to do, or how to think, we do, occasionally, share how we arrive at our way of

thinking about something, our “guiding principles.” Believe it or not, the younger generation actually does want to know how and what we think about many things. Not all the time, but occasionally and at the appropriate time, it is useful to let them know the principles that have guided our best thinking and decisions in life. At my best, I tell my child how I think about a given issue, but, after all, it is his life and his decision to make. I will remain interested and open, remembering other people have to find their way. Sometimes their mistakes will provide their best learning opportunities.

2. One’s own adult relationships

Some parents are really neglectful, seeming to have no time or interest in their children from day one. (Many of these parents are just as “fused” with their children as everyone else, but are reacting to the fusion with distance.)

The more frequent problem most clinicians see is a fusion or bonding with a child that takes the form of over-focus. This over-focus can take a worried, negative form or it can take the form of an overindulgent, spoiling attitude. Neither prepares the child for life in the adult world, so he or she will automatically find someone else with whom to replicate the fusion in an over intense relationship that, because of its intensity, doesn’t work very well.

So one of the best things we can do for our kids is to work on our own adult relationships, getting a little more out of the fusion with the child. Our spouse will, after all, be around a lot longer than the kids. Focusing more on making our marriages work automatically puts the kids in a little less focused position, helping them to become more independent—more a self.

3. Taking a stand, if and when appropriate

Occasionally, parents have to take a stand for better behavior, or for higher and better functioning. It says, “ I believe this family can do better and this is what you can expect from me in the future.” Stand –taking defines limits and sets boundaries. “This is what I can and cannot put up with.” It may have to do with grades, curfews, paying rent, or a definite time for becoming self-sufficient. This kind of stand-taking, after all, shows expectations that show confidence in the youngster. It says, “I know you can do it.”

Many parents are so afraid their kids won’t like them if they set boundaries that they can never define the limits in this way. However, this is part of the parent’s job description. They certainly won’t like us if we prepare them for a world that doesn’t exist.



Question: My child attends Virginia Tech. Any advice?

Dr. Gilbert: There will be a wide range of reactions to this tragedy among the students, the faculty and all the families involved. I would be most concerned about those who don’t seem to react in any way in the beginning. Those initial reactions are useful and to be encouraged. If the students were friends with any of the victims, depending on how close or meaningful the relationship, reactions may continue months.

What assists in living through something like this, in my experience, is:

- Allowing, encouraging the tears in the beginning

- Funerals and memorial services are useful to most people
- More family contact by phone & email on weekends and breaks
- Getting back to one's normal routine as soon as possible
- It is not disrespectful to have fun times after a tragedy.
- Overuse of substances—getting drunk or high—will not be useful, it will only add to the problem.
- Where a youngster and a victim were close, contacts with the victim's family may be useful.
- Relying on one's faith, in quiet, with study and prayer
- Perhaps in contrast to what I understand to be one option, I would not encourage people to take their present grade and quit school. I would encourage them to finish out the semester, seeing work and carrying on one's usual life as a needed and useful part of the healing process.



Question: How much does one lend a hand to offspring in the launching process? How much money is appropriate? When are we as a family being a resource and when are we becoming a relief agency? Why do we take them off the payroll?

Dr. Gilbert: Every situation is different, so no one answer fits all. But some guidelines from Bowen family systems theory can point the way.

Don't do anything for people they can and should be doing for self. While it may make one feel good, bolstering the ego, to over-give, it actually infantilizes and weakens the other.

Everyone in the family can be expected to live up to their highest functioning abilities.

Confidence in one's offspring to solve their life problems goes much further than nagging, worrying or complaining.

Probably most important is that open, equal and separate relationship with our young adults.



Question: What is the best way to tell my near-adult children what I think?

Dr. Gilbert: In my own family I have tried to tell them what has worked for me. "This is how I see it." Not telling them what they should do or think, but simply how I have thought about situations such as the one under discussion, what has worked for me—an "I message." Often, to open up the conversation, questions are great. Storytelling is another absorbing way to be heard. But we must remember that in an equal relationship, we talk only about as much as we listen. Parents whose children will open up to their parents are those who have parents who listen. And they listen for understanding. What a special privilege when our kids come to us first with their hopes, dreams and dilemmas. ♦

It is worth noting that the October conference, sponsored by SFSN, will feature Dr. Michael Kerr and Mrs. Kathleen Kerr in a full day's presentation about the family with teenagers and young

adults. They will relate their own family experiences as well as those of clinical families, looking through the lens of Bowen family systems theory.

Written in 2007

If you would like to contribute questions or comments to this column for Dr. Gilbert to address, please write her at: rgoffice136@gmail.com.