

THE SIX STAGES OF PARENTHOOD*

The task of being a parent parallels children's growth and development. Just as children grow and change as they develop, noted researcher Ellen Galinsky asserts that parents grow and change as they move from one stage of parenthood to the next. Galinsky conducted extensive interviews with 228 parents (of 396 children) who had diverse experiences in parenthood - married, divorced, widowed, step, foster, adoptive, and guardian mothers and fathers. She talked with teenage parents and older parents, parents expecting their first child and those with large families. The children of these families included those who were gifted as well as those who possessed challenging special needs. The parents included a wide range of economic, ethnic, racial, geographic, and religious backgrounds. Galinsky analyzed these interviews and presented her conclusions in a book titled *The Six Stages of Parenthood*.

According to Galinsky's findings, the experience of parenthood is complex and diverse. However, within the diversity, Galinsky was able to identify common threads and similar ways that different parents perceived their experiences as parents. Galinsky traces six distinct stages in the life of a parent in relation to their growing child. By taking a look at these different stages, those who work with children and youth in out-of-school programs can gain some insight about parental needs and concerns.

A summary of Galinsky's six stages is presented in the following pages. More detail is provided for **Stage Four: Interpretive** and **Stage Five: Interdependent**, because these stages describe the parental tasks and concerns of parents of elementary and middle school children, the age group commonly served by school-age programs. The other stages are briefly summarized to provide a broad overview of the tasks of parenthood over the life of each child. It is important to remember that parents of school-age children may be parenting children at other stages as well; it can be quite a challenge for parents to move in and out of different stages during the course of a day!

* Excerpted and adapted with permission from Ellen Galinsky, *The Six Stages of Parenthood*. Reading, MA: Perseus Books, 1987. As printed in R. Newman, *Building Relationships with Parents and Families in School-Age Programs*. New Albany, OH: School-Age NOTES, 2008. Pages 56 – 59.

Stage One: Image-Making

According to researcher Ellen Galinsky, parents begin to shape their role as parents even before the child arrives on the scene. They begin to create pictures in their minds of what lies ahead as they form images of birth and parenthood. Galinsky stresses that this imagining of what lies ahead is a lifelong process. As parents go through each stage of parenthood, they continue to work with these images. Growth occurs at points when parents modify an image to be more consistent with reality, or modify their own behavior to reach toward an image. While some parents resist or turn away from growth, Galinsky's interviews revealed that *people do change*; that parenthood is itself a *transforming experience*.

Stage Two: Nurturing

This stage goes from birth until the child begins to say "No," somewhere around eighteen months to two years. In this stage, parents compare their images of birth, of their child, and of themselves as parents with their actual experience. Whether or not there is a substantial discrepancy between the imagined and actual child, it is by getting to know the child that the parents can resolve these differences - by holding, touching, caring for the baby. A process of bonding takes place. They become attached to the baby. As parents face feelings of attachment, they work through a variety of questions and issues. They face questions about their priorities, about how much time they should give to the baby, and how much time to devote to other aspects of life.

Stage Three: Authority

This stage goes approximately from the child's second to the child's fourth or fifth year. In this stage, Galinsky says parents face the task of deciding what kind of authority to be, how rules are set, what the rules are, when they are enforced, and what happens when they are broken. The theme of control vs. lack of control reaches a peak and predominates in the *Authority Stage*. In this stage, parents are sure of their identity as parents and have an attachment to the child. Now they face the major task of accepting their authority over the child, and begin to understand the child is not really an extension of them. Most parents approach parenthood with expectations about the kind of disciplinarian they are going to be. They may form images about not getting angry, always being capable of unconditional love, or being a different kind of disciplinarian than their parents were. They may also have images about children – that children are always nice or that children will stay the same from one year to the next. Images that work can be kept; others must be revised in order for the parent and child to grow harmoniously. Problems in the parent/child relationship are inevitable. The question during the *Authority Stage* becomes how to resolve the problems which occur - for parents it means facing the challenge of becoming an authority and developing the skills to play the authority role appropriately.

Stage Four: Interpretive

Generally, this stage encompasses the elementary school years. It begins in the child's preschool years and ends with the approach of adolescence. The child's entrance into kindergarten or first grade usually prompts parents to review their images of parenthood, to ask themselves how realistic they've been. By evaluating the past, they prepare themselves for changes to come. Through self evaluations, parents can become more realistic about themselves and about their children. The task at this stage is *interpreting*. Although parents recognize they are not the only ones who influence their child, they are concerned with how they are interpreting themselves to their children as well as how they are interpreting and developing their children's self-concepts. They also are figuring out how they want to interpret reality, how to answer their children's questions, and what kinds of knowledge, skills, and values to promote. A part of this process for parents involves evaluating their children. These evaluations are based on the images they have held on to and the comparisons to siblings or classmates or neighborhood children. These evaluations must be reconciled with the child's self concept and with the judgments that others (e.g. teachers, child care staff) make about the child. During this stage, the child also begins to create images of what a parent should be like and some of their images are in conflict with the images they have of their own parent(s). Defining the increasing separateness of their own and their child's identity while holding onto the connectedness continues to be a task in the *Interpretive Stage*. The older the child gets, the more the parent realizes that "my child is not me."

The tasks in the *Interpretive Stage* require parents to decide how they will interpret their children's existence to them. Sometimes parents fall in to these decisions; other times the decisions are chosen. Here is an overview of the parental decisions to be made in the *Interpretive Stage*:

- *Deciding what kind of life they want to and can afford to provide.* Questions of giving and getting are often focused on material things. Parents have to decide when to say "yes" and when to say "no" to children's requests for new clothes, toys, sporting equipment, etc.
- *Deciding how to interpret facts, skills, and experiences to their children* (e.g. bad dreams, a bank robbery down the street, a teacher the child thinks isn't fair, a neighbor who isn't kind to his pets, the meaning of words like "incest" or "rape" in response to the child's questions). In addition to interpreting or telling, parents during this stage are *listening*.
- *Deciding how they want their children to behave* (manners, household chores, etc.).
- *Deciding how involved to be in the children's lives, at home and away from home.* This decision relates not only to the child, but to how much time parents need for themselves as individuals, for their work, for each other.
- *Deciding when and how much to step in, to do things with one's children.*
- *Deciding when to let go, to encourage the children to do things independently.*
- *Deciding how involved to become with the other significant people, children and adults, in their own children's lives* (teachers, counselors, child care staff, social workers, parents of the child's friends, etc.)

- *Deciding how to define the changing relationship between parent and child.* For example, the physical relationship between parent and child is changing. How much do parents and children hug, hold, cuddle, and kiss as the child continues to grow and develop?

As they wrestle with all these decisions, Galinsky emphasizes that parents in the *Interpretive Stage* must involve themselves in the task of redefining the *Authority* relationship. They must respond to children's concepts of fairness as their children master new reasoning skills. In families with several children, parents have the task of dealing with conflict between their children. As they deal with these issues, many parents experience a feeling of slipping in and out of control. They have to continue to figure out how they are going to handle family spats, competitions, accusations, and put-downs.

Throughout the *Interpretive Stage*, parents respond to children's easy and not-so-easy questions and concerns. This causes parents to review what they think, believe, and value. It causes them to pull together their own beliefs so they can translate them to their children. This is a demanding, challenging process for all parents in this stage.

Stage Five: Interdependent

This stage spans the child's teenage years. The issues that predominated in the *Authority Stage* rise back into prominence. This stage begins when parents become aware of what often seem to be unexpected, sometimes even shocking changes in the child - changes in clothing, behavior toward the opposite sex, language, hairstyle, physical growth, etc. Because the changes are often dramatic, the actual entry into this stage can abruptly challenge images about who the child is. Galinsky emphasizes that today's parents field many problems that they feel inexperienced in handling. The dangers today are bigger, and yet parents' power is diminishing. With this in mind, there are two important facets parents must concentrate on as they redefine the authority relationship:

1. Communicating with teenagers, and
2. Setting limits and giving guidance.

To handle these issues effectively, parents must know themselves - their own standards and expectations and they must know their teenager - how much guidance he or she needs. During the *Interdependent Stage*, the parent must also accept that the teenager's major task is developing a separate identity. Separation is a gradual process. Through this stage, the parent/child relationship is redefined. The new relationship involves swinging back and forth between distance and closeness, separateness and connectedness. The major task of this stage is redefining the parent/child relationship. Here are some of the related sub-tasks for parents in the *Interdependent Stage*:

- *Re-examining their images of who the child is and who the child is becoming. Redefining images that aren't workable.*
- *Learning about the stages of adolescence as a tool for increasing understanding of their children.*
- *Shoring up old ways of communicating and developing new ways to facilitate talking together.*

- *Responding to what teenagers say and do and what they don't say and do by setting limits and giving guidance.*
- *Clarifying their own standards and expectations for their teenager in order to resolve important questions such as:*
 - *Who makes decisions about what?*
 - *How will decisions be enforced?*
 - *What does the future hold for the teenager – finishing high school, going to college, going to work?*
 - *Where is the teenager allowed to go? With whom? By what method of transportation?*
 - *What about smoking, drinking, drugs, and sex?*
 - *How will money issues be handled and resolved?*
- *Changing as the teenager changes and avoiding battles of wills.*
- *Accepting the teenager's identity, including sexual roles, and dealing with feelings of affinity and dissimilarity to their child.*
- *Evaluating their roles as parents and dealing with the evaluations their children are making of them.*
- *Creating new bonds with an almost-grown child.*

Parents are inevitably changed as they work on these tasks and move through the *Interdependent Stage* with their teenager.

Stage Six: Departure

The time when the child leaves home is characterized by evaluations. Parents evaluate whether they've achieved the parent/grown child relationship they wanted as well as taking stock of their overall success and failures. They form images about what the future will bring - how far away their child might go and how often they will be together. Often the *Departure Stage* spans a long period of time. During the *Departure Stage*, parents search for new ways to say they are still a family by creating new rituals, habits, and traditions. In the *Departure Stage* parents have the task of loosening their control even more. It involves a complex set of tasks: caring, being available, helping without controlling, accepting the grown child's separate identity. In accepting this separate identity, parents learn that to accept separateness implies the beginning of a new connection.