

The Interview
Dr. Lindsay C. Gibson
Thinks Compassion for
Our Parents Can Be a Trap





By David Marchese

March 22, 2025

We live in a culture permeated by therapy, one in which people are eager to apply psychotherapeutic concepts to themselves and their closest relationships. That includes, naturally, the relationship with our parents. But the desire to understand the hows and whys of our parents' emotional influence is hardly new. Indeed, a classic poem by Philip Larkin, "This Be the Verse," was buzzing around my mind as I prepared for this interview with the clinical psychologist Dr. Lindsay C. Gibson, author of the book "Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents." Larkin's poem begins like this: "They mess you up, your mum and dad./They may not mean to, but they do./They fill you with the faults they had/And add some extra, just for you." (Poetry aficionados will notice I swapped in a clean word for a foul one. Forgive me, Philip.)

But what do we do with the age-old knowledge that parents can bend us in damaging ways? That's where Gibson comes in. Her book has become a slow-burning best seller since it was published in 2015 and has earned a devoted following on social media, where videos of people talking about it have been seen by millions. In the book, Gibson argues that a key to understanding harmful parental behaviors is, as her title suggests, the notion of emotional immaturity. Furthermore, that parental immaturity has negative ripple effects for children that last into adulthood. But thankfully, she says, it's possible to get out from under the weight of those emotionally immature parents. Even if that means, in drastic cases, breaking off the relationship entirely.

So as someone for whom Larkin's poem rings true, I had much to ask Gibson, as well as a fair degree of skepticism about her work to put to her, all of which she was game to entertain, and all of which can still at times leave me muttering to myself: "Parents. Oy."

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The broad definition of emotionally immature parents is parents who refuse to validate their children's feelings and intuitions, who might be reactive and who are lacking in empathy or awareness. But can you give me examples of emotionally immature behaviors? The biggest one is egocentrism. Imagine that a person starts and ends all their consideration with what's best for them — that's egocentrism. I just started watching "The Sopranos" for the first time. If you listen to the dialogue, they completely nailed it, because everything always comes back to the viewpoint of the emotionally immature character. It's always all about them. Another one is the lack of empathy. The parent just doesn't get it. They say, "Why are you so upset about this?" Or, "This is not a big deal." They cannot enter into the reality of their child's emotional truth.

Those characteristics can show up even among the best parents sometimes. So how do people distinguish between normal, flawed parental behavior and behavior that's detrimental enough to rise to the label of "emotionally immature"? If you think of emotional maturity and immaturity as being on a continuum, all of us have a spot that we tend to hang out on. It doesn't mean that we stay there. If you're tired or you're sick or you're stressed, you are *not* going to be as emotionally mature as you could be when you're rested and well and not stressed. However, if you're in one of these compromised states, you may do some things that look immature, but it's going to bother you. You're going to think about what you did. The emotionally immature person, it's like: "That was in the past. Why are you wallowing in it?" The more emotionally mature person would get why you're still upset, and they're going to do something that indicates that they have felt for the other person's experience.

My hunch is that people are arriving at the conclusion that their parents were emotionally immature in adulthood — it's hindsight. If that's true, and adults are feeling a lack of fulfillment or unhappiness, how do they know those feelings result from their parents' behaviors and not any number of other factors? What tends to happen in therapy is that the person comes in, and they have some immediate issue. Maybe they're having a problem in their relationship or their work. Maybe they had a panic attack. Usually, the first few sessions, you don't necessarily hear

about the parent. Five, six sessions in, you ask them: “Before you began feeling so low, what had happened that evening?” Then you find out that their dad said something completely disrespectful, and you begin to make connections. We’d find out that they were having deep reactions to things that their parents did and said, but they had been trained to not see that as legitimate. They thought that they were being disloyal or petty for even bringing it up. I would be sitting there, and my mind would be going, “That person that they’re describing is so narcissistic” or “She sounds like a borderline personality disorder,” but I would have to find ways of translating that into behavior so we could talk about it without labeling in a way that made their parents sound pathological.

‘Isn’t labeling someone’s parent “emotionally immature” a kind of pathologizing? You could argue that. There’s no way of getting around that you’re boiling down this person that they love into a set of traits, and it calls them a name. It’s pejorative. But when you say “emotionally immature,” it’s not from the diagnostic manual. Although it is a way of categorizing them, it has a more explanatory tone. If you say, “Your father is narcissistic,” I get an immediate caricature of a narcissist. If I say, “Your father sounds like he may be emotionally immature,” there’s a little grace in that.

If somebody goes to their parent and says, “I think you were an emotionally immature parent,” how would a parent ever disprove that? If they would only say, “Tell me what you mean by that.” It would be the curiosity and the caring about what their child was expressing. Emotionally immature people shut the door because they know they don’t handle emotional things very well, and their best defense is to not get into it and to point the finger back at you.



Gibson in an online course focused on helping children of “emotionally immature” parents heal. Praxis at New Harbinger Publications

When is estrangement the best option? That is something I start thinking about when they start having physical or emotional problems directly associated with their contact with their parents. Say, a woman who had very demanding, egocentric, emotionally immature parents, and they expected her to come at the drop of a hat, help them out, do something for them. They were as needy as her own children and also entitled, so she was exhausted because when they pulled her into these interactions there was no exchange of energy. It's like, they need more, and she's a bad person because she's trying to set a boundary. It's always frustrating, and you never feel like you're doing enough. This woman I'm thinking about, she was developing stress-related physical symptoms, and it was like, OK, let's talk about the effect on your health. So then you may bring up to the person, “Do you want to keep visiting them?” Lots of times, that's the first time that thought's ever crossed their mind.

They didn't realize estrangement was a possibility. No, they didn't, and when they get that idea, it begins to expose this whole arrangement that is implicit in the relationship. Which is the parent gets to do whatever they want, and that adult child is supposed to go along with it or they're being a bad child. There's a moral

obligation that is not only implied but explicitly stated: If I have a need, you should be there because you're my kid. I'm trying to get them to feel the cost of it to them, which often they have completely tuned out because they don't want to be a bad person.

What might your book's ongoing popularity say about the culture now? Big topic! [Laughs.] I think the book's ongoing popularity has been due to the fact that it said something about the cultural stereotype that we've had about parents for eons: that all parents love their children; all parents only want the best for their children; all parents put their children first; children can depend on their parents to be there for them when no one else is. I think people's actual experience is that these stereotypes and these tropes don't match up with their emotional experience.

I think it's fair to say that one of the problems with contemporary life is how we label other people in ways that are reductive or don't acknowledge multidimensionality. Is there any part of you that thinks it's *not* a good thing for the people who have read your book to be thinking about a parent, Oh, you're emotionally immature, and that is what defines you now? Absolutely, I think it's a danger. That is the problem with the categorizing part of our mind. Once we call something *something*, we think we know all about it. On the other hand, sometimes when you reduce and isolate out the operative factors, it gives you a way to not only recognize it but to control it and do something about it. So it's a valid point, David, but it is a point that you could say about anything where you have an effective categorization: that it oversimplifies and leads to black-and-white conclusions that are not helpful. I've just tried to moderate that by helping people see more of the big picture about why these people became emotionally immature, what they're trying to do with that kind of behavior and what you can do about it.



Philip Montgomery for The New York Times

I have a distant relationship with my biological father. There's a lot of pain there. I have seen him twice in the last 20 years; maybe we email four times a year. It's a distant relationship through my choosing, but I think somebody who's more compassionate would probably figure out a way to have a relationship that *isn't* so distant. So how do we think about the idea of compassion in that example? For emotionally immature people, your compassion will be weaponized because their egocentrism makes them determined to be the innocent party, for them to be the victim and for you to put aside your needs in order to meet theirs. So when I'm working with people who have been raised by people like this, I am always very careful about pushing for compassion, forgiveness, any of those things that say, "Even though you have treated me badly, even though you have invalidated me and made me feel bad about myself, even though you have tried to control me and manipulate my emotions, I'm going to be empathic and feel for you."

Do children owe parents anything? I look at that question differently. I look at it as, do any of us owe anybody else anything?

What's the answer? The answer is, yes, I think we do. If I'm walking down the street and somebody trips and falls, I'm going to stop and help them get up. I wouldn't want to live in a world where that wasn't there, but what has happened is that there has been such an assumption that because you're my child, you owe me something. Or, I'm entitled to your attention, and I can treat you any way I want because we're family. That's where you get to a point where there should be a boundary. Know what it's going to cost you to respond. Think about *yourself* too, and then make your best decision.

People could decide, Hey, my unhappiness has to do with being raised by emotionally immature parents, and I'll work on that. Then six months down the line, they realize there's still a bunch of things they're unhappy about. So how do we understand what our expectations for happiness should be? If you ever watch little kids, their default mode is happiness, and that's because they're spontaneously going and doing the next interesting thing. They naturally are following their energies. I think that's what happens with people too. If they feel released to say no to the things that kill their energy, if they don't feel guilted into

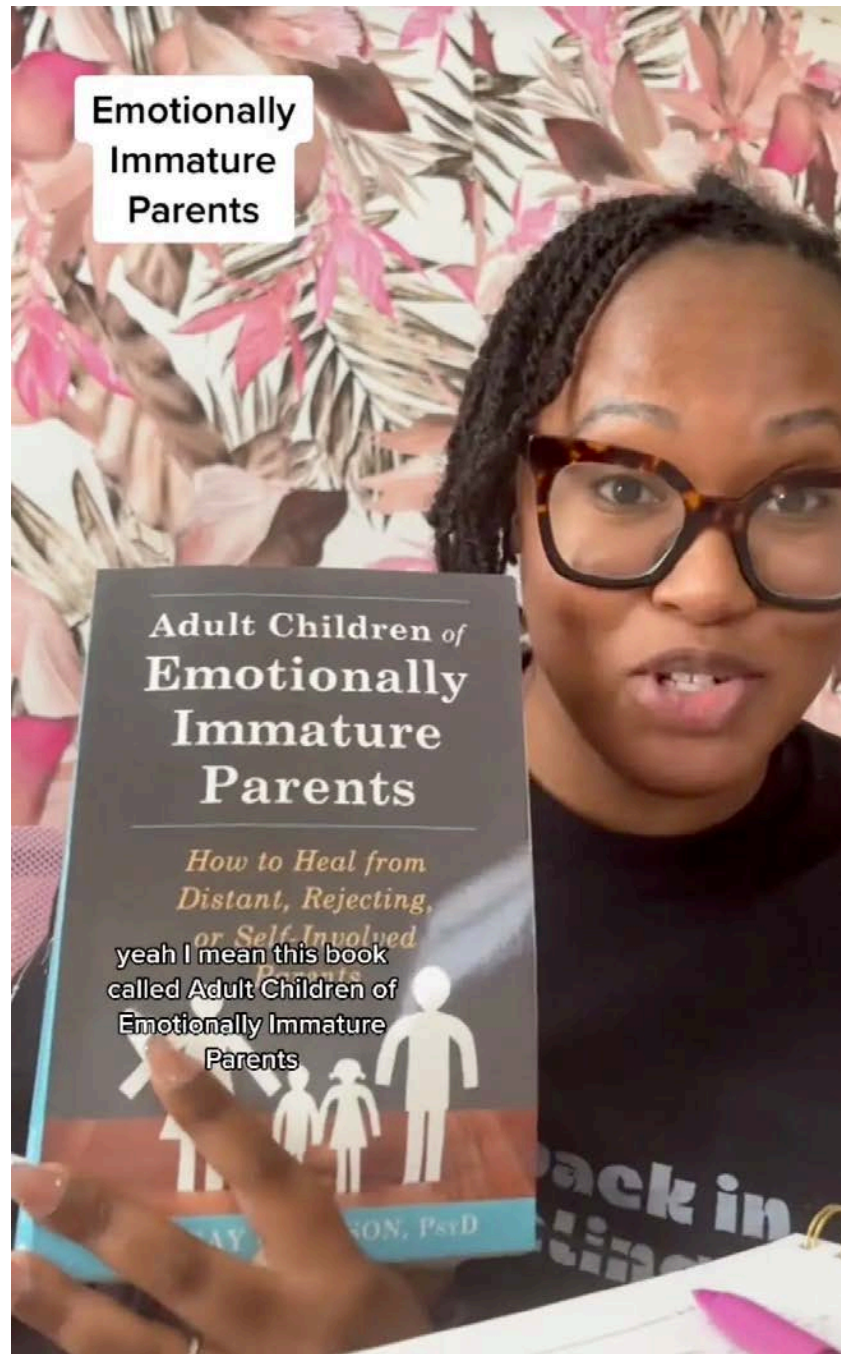
acting more compassionate or loving than they really feel, if we take these things off of them, it's like a cork that bobs to the top of the water. The emotionally immature person needs other people to emotionally stabilize them, make them happy, and also to buffer their self-esteem. When we can get the idea that we're not in this world to function as a sort of auxiliary coping mechanism for people who can't do it for themselves, we begin to feel our energy coming back. That's what happiness is. Happiness is like free energy.

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Earlier you cautioned against the idea of compassion. At the same time, I want to hold onto the idea that the emotionally immature person, they're probably struggling. They, too, deserve grace. How do we open the door to the possibility of change and reconciliation and understanding *without* compassion? Oh, no. I don't think we should do anything without compassion. But what I'm talking about is that with the people that I work with in psychotherapy, the adult children of these emotionally immature parents, the problem was really an excess of compassion. What I've seen is that the compassion takes over the instinctual self-preservation, and the person feels too guilty, too ashamed and too self-doubting to even think about what's healthy for them.

How much can people really change? I don't think there's much possibility of change unless you have self-reflection, and you have self-reflection because you have a sense of self. You developed a sense of self because your emotional needs have been met and you have been responded to as a human being early enough that that sense of self gets in there. To go back to "The Sopranos," that's what his therapist was trying to do. She got Tony to start, in a minuscule way, self-reflecting. That makes change possible. I think there are earth-shattering moments that permanently shift your view of something or your way of thinking. That kind of change can happen in a flash. It's like a joint goes back into place. There's a click

and it's like, *ah*, everything starts to reorganize around that new realization. What I have found, though, is that the biggest change that people seem to have gotten from therapy is that they have a realization of their own inner experience. They now know how things affect them, what they really feel, what they really think, and they use that to guide themselves through relationships and their lives. The insight is not an intellectual exercise. It is like a becoming — an awareness that *this is who I am*.



Several years after its debut, Gibson's book became popular on TikTok, where the therapist Kiara McNair recommended

When we're talking about relationships between people, is there such a thing as "the truth"? Just to use my own example: I have what I think is a truthful understanding of my relationship with my biological father and how it affected me as an adult. I think he has his own interpretation that is true for him. So what does truth mean in your context? Well, there's no eye in the sky that's going to one day give us the answer, but I think we can sense the truth for ourselves. Even if it's a bad thing, even if it's a painful thought, you still have those experiences of, I've touched on the truth of something. As far as human beings go, the best we can get is that internal sensing of what our truth is. And of course the next question's going to be, What if I am a conspiracy theorist or a paranoid personality?

It doesn't even have to be that extreme. What if I've come up with something that is most palatable for me? Well then you've got a problem, and what will happen is that reality will spank you. [Laughs.]

I asked about the problem of happiness, and your reply was in terms of how children's default mode is happy. I was wondering if that might be an idealization of childhood. I have two kids, and I take them to the playground, and if I scan the playground, I see anger, fear, conflict — in addition to happy feelings. But if our expectation about childhood is one where happiness is the default, might that retrospectively lead us to feelings of disappointment as adults? I think what I was trying to get at is that if children's basic needs are met, they want to go and experience things that make them even happier. What you're seeing on the playground, though, is a bunch of kids who are navigating a world that couldn't care less about their basic happiness.

Sounds familiar! Yeah, it sounds familiar. So as they're bouncing off of that in their lives, they're going to have all these emotions. But the happiness search — I think it's why plants reach for the sun. It's universal. Things that are alive want to flourish. They go toward whatever it is that's going to maximize their optimal growth and experience. That's what I believe. So I think that's what little kids are doing. But being that they're living in a world in which they have to be watched and controlled by parents, they're going to hit all these blocks, and that's going to

make them unhappy. It's certainly not an ideal existence. But it's important for us to remember that we do have something inside us — what I would call the core self — and this core self tells us when we are getting what we need. Or when we're being treated badly.

How much are parents ultimately responsible for who we become as adults? 53 percent.

Oh, perfect! I'm assuming you really want me to answer that.

Of course. I would say it matters a lot. I was kidding when I said 53. I think it's much higher. But we have to keep in mind that even if it's 73 percent, that other part — the genetic, the physical — is huge. The mix, I am not sure of. But I *do* know that you can mess it up early if you don't pay attention to what something needs when it's young.

This interview has been edited and condensed from two conversations. Listen to and follow “The Interview” on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, YouTube, iHeartRadio, Amazon Music or the New York Times Audio app.

Director of photography (video): Tre Cassetta

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