

Differentiation In Adults & In Children

Intimacy is experienced in two ways:

- Connecting sexually for adults, and/or in a nurturing way with a sense of secure attachment for adults and children
- In moments of clear **differentiation & deeper self-exposure** to another in a context of safety & trust

What is Differentiation? - The active, ongoing process of defining self, revealing self, clarifying boundaries, and managing the anxiety that comes from risking either more intimacy or potential separation. Differentiation is a process that can only happen in the context of a relationship. Often people confuse this with individuation. They are both important but different processes. Parents teach children to “differentiate” and learn who they are *as distinct from their parents*, in a context of safety and trust. This is the foundation for effective intimate relationships later.

Differentiation is the fuel that allows effective adult couples to attain exceptional or uncommon results and helps them become increasingly committed to one another and over time to recognize that their love is irreplaceable. Parents teach children how love can abide alongside the children’s having different ideas, perceptions & experiences from those of their parents.

Differentiation of Self (Learned from Parents or in Therapy)

- Capacity to internally self-reflect & identify own thoughts, feelings, wants, desires & internal cues, as distinct from those of others.
- Able to express thoughts, feelings, wants, desires and impulses congruently & clearly, in real time, or at least close enough to real time that a partner doesn’t feel blindsided.
- Able to be an effective initiator of discussions: contain self, manage defenses, share vulnerability openly (talk *about* vulnerability without being flooded by emotion).
- Actively manage emotional contagion, resist getting swept up in partner’s/parent’s feelings.

Differentiation from Partner or Child’s Differentiation from Parent(s):

- Able to calm oneself & listen without interrupting or defending self.
- Ask *other*-directed questions.
- Have *genuine interest and curiosity* about partner’s/child’s/others’ internal process.
- Understand partner/child in light of his/her history or context.
- Work to develop and express empathy.
- Ability to manage emotional contagion, allowing openness & closeness to a distressed partner/child, without getting caught in or flooded by their distress.

Evolution of Differentiation (Learned Early from Parent(s) or in Therapy):

1. Internal self-reflecting and identifying of one’s own thoughts, feelings, values, wants and desires.
2. Developing the increasing ability to express congruently one’s own thoughts, feelings, wants and desires. To expose “who I am” in a context of safety and trust.
3. Developing awareness of the partner as *separate and different*. Child learns from parent to develop awareness of self as separate/distinct from the parent.
4. Developing an increasing ability to listen, hear and then respond effectively *to these differences* – with clear boundaries. Parents help/teach children to do this in response to child’s differences with the parent’s experience or perceptions.
5. Developing the ability to *create an accepting environment* in the relationship that also supports desired changes. Parents offer this to their children as part of teaching and modeling differentiation.

Self-Capacities that are Developed and Strengthened by Differentiation:

- Increased self-accountability
- Increased capacity to self-soothe
- Clearer boundary definition
- Increased ability to self-validate
- Increased anxiety tolerance & management
- Increased capacity to experience empathy
- Increased acceptance of other as separate & different from self
- Increased ability to internally self-reflect and self-define

DIFFERENTIATION: adapted considerably by Ria Severance © 2015 from the Couples Institute, Drs. Ellyn Bader & Peter Pearson