



# The Eros Of Parenthood: Explorations In Light And Dark

*Noelle Oxenhandler*

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Leaning over a sleeping child or waiting for a small dripping body to emerge from the tub, what parent hasn't felt the pull of contradictory emotions: the rush of tenderness, the pang of anxiety? We know that the physical love between parent and child is both natural and necessary, yet it's a subject we're afraid to approach-- indeed, it's been called "the last taboo." In language both lyrical and provocative, *The Eros of Parenthood* explores this highly charged and controversial territory.

Even to put the two words together- *eros* and *parenthood*-- is to enter a forbidden realm. Yet the two are inextricably linked. For *eros*, the energy of connection, fuels the immense labor of parental care, fosters the formation of the human self, and lies at the foundation of all forms of human love. In its intense physicality, the love between parent and young child is similar to that between adult lovers, but it is different in some absolutely crucial ways. Healthy parental love is sheltering, protective. Putting the child's needs first, this love respects the inequality-- in size, power, and maturity-- between parent and child.

Alas, in our zeal to protect children from the trauma of sexual abuse, we often resort to black-and-white thinking. Because we are afraid to acknowledge the erotic component of parent-child love, the most innocent interactions become suspect. The atmosphere becomes so saturated with anxiety that it intrudes on the most tender moments between parent and child.

Navigating between the extremes of injurious denial and hysterical fear, *The Eros of Parenthood* finds a middle ground. While celebrating the passion that naturally exists between parent and child, it seeks the limits of this passion. Inspired by the fairy-tale figure of Goldilocks, Noelle Oxenhandler takes as a central question: "Between the poles of too hot and too cold, too much and too little, how can I find *the just right*?"

The answer to this question lies in the power of *attunement*. A dynamic process of adjustment that balances between fusion and separateness, attunement is the compass in Goldilocks's hand, the key to the mystery of intimacy between parent and child. To understand this is to discover a way through the *eros* of parenthood that, while breaking the grip of fearful thinking, leads to an authentic sense of boundary.

In poetic prose that encompasses topics as subtle as a pregnant mother's dream and as dramatic as the recovered memory of abuse, *The Eros of Parenthood* breaks new ground. Personal, yet with profoundly social implications, the book employs a highly readable format in which each chapter consists of a linked sequence of "explorations" that can be read in a single sitting, in the brief interstices of a busy parent's life. *The hardest thing for us, in the wake of what we have too often witnessed is-- while keeping our children safe from harm-- to experience the full measure of delight in them. To gaze at them while they sleep-- on their backs with limbs flung like the petals of an open flower or curled on their sides like an inner ear...*

Through responsibility and tender awareness, parents and children can reclaim a form of love that is natural, necessary, and the ground of all human intimacy.

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