



*Lucy Daniels*

*Center for Early Childhood*

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

### **Mommy, Can I Marry You?**

“Mommy, can I marry you?”: A question heard in some form or another routinely by mothers of boys and fathers of girls, ages three, four, and five in cultures across the globe. We will explain why this question is so common and provide a basis for a helpful response to that mothers can provide for their son. Although we will be specifying mothers and sons, everything that we say can be transposed to father-daughter relationships.

**The Oedipus Complex:** Sigmund Freud coined the term “Oedipus Complex” to describe a young child’s wish to be married to a parent. Oedipal feelings are universal among children and should be welcomed as an important step in their normal development. Why do children have such wishes?

Until the age of three, children’s main emotional tasks are to feel safe, loved, and secure and develop a sense of identity and confidence. Around the age of three, children begin looking into the future. They imagine becoming dancers, firemen, doctors – and especially, the roles they most admire, fathers or mothers with a family. Not understanding all the realistic and social impediments to such a plan, who could possibly be a more suitable candidate to become a boy’s future wife than his beloved mother?

**What does being married mean to a young child?:** Around age three, children begin to have sexual feelings. They have a general awareness that something special and physically intimate occurs between a mother and father and that this is somehow related to making babies, although without undue exposure they will not understand the details. Thus, children’s thinking about marriage includes a sexual tinge.

**Oedipal rivalry:** A boy's mother is (generally) already married. Therefore children view their same-sex parent as the main impediment to their marriage plans! A boy's Oedipal Complex involves both loving feelings toward his mother and resentments to his beloved father who had the nerve to get his mother first!

**Going beyond "Mommy, will you marry me":** Although children may only ask once or twice about marrying their parent, the transition from viewing themselves as marrying a parent to viewing themselves as marrying someone who is outside their family takes a long time. After all, this transition involves a basic change in their own feeling about themselves and their future, requiring their confidence that someday they will not need their parents to take care of them. It is wonderful and exciting to imagine a new kind of future, but there is also mourning for the old relationships and a permanent childhood. Therefore, children usually work on their oedipal wishes throughout the ages of three through six, although they may keep many of these sensitive thoughts private.

**Responding to a child:** Mommy's should not laugh or trivialize their son's question. The question may feel cute to grown-ups, but the young boy is not trying to be cute and deserves dignity and protection as he receives a hurtful rebuff. The fact that the question often comes out of the blue demonstrates that he has an inner life, is pondering, and seizing a moment that feels right.

What about some common responses? It is reasonable for a mommy to say that she met daddy first. This is true and helpful but not the whole story. Children know about death, perhaps even about divorce, and this answer does not fully eliminate the possibility of a future marital and sexual love between parent and child. Similarly, if a mommy says that she is too old and her son will find someone his own age also leaves a bit of hope alive because the child may believe that he can catch up in age or that his parent might change her mind about the importance of the age gap. Therefore, in a tactful way (remember that this is a proposal!), it is important for parents to convey in words or attitude that such a marriage can never be, but that a mommy's love as a mother for her son is forever.

**The lessons of the oedipal phase:** Children learn invaluable lessons as they lay the groundwork within their imagination for a future life outside the family. The Oedipal years provide an opportunity to learn about love and needs, and the limits of any given relationship. Children learn that love does not necessarily involve a sexual component and that someone can love in different ways, for different reasons, without the various loves detracting from each other. A mother's love of her husband should not detract or compete with the love of a child because it fulfills different needs in her. Furthermore, as a child experiences his and his father's love for each other while he also is feeling some envy and resentment toward his father, he will learn the invaluable lesson that even loving, stable, and secure relationships always include elements of anger, resentment and jealousy. And that it is ok for relationships to be that way.

Finally, children can learn that bad things or in their eyes unfair things, such as being rejected by a parent, can happen without anyone being responsible. The reason children and parents cannot marry is not due to any problem with the child's or parent's attributes, thoughts, or actions. Undesirable things frequently happen independent of human responsibility. This is the real value of the "just because" part of a mother's answer. Wishes and reality are different, and events and what is fair is also different. The oedipal phase provides most children with their first real opportunity to separate the issue of fairness from life's fortunes and misfortunes.

We hope that we have been able to show why "Mommy, can I marry you" is a complicated and important question for a child. Parental assistance with helping their child to accept reality will strengthen him to face life with increased maturity and confidence.