The family projection process describes the primary way parents transmit their emotional problems to a child. The projection process can impair the functioning of one or more children and increase their vulnerability to clinical symptoms. Children inherit many types of problems (as well as strengths) through the relationships with their parents, but the problems they inherit that most affect their lives are relationship sensitivities such as heightened needs for attention and approval, difficulty dealing with expectations, the tendency to blame oneself or others, feeling responsible for the happiness of others or that others are responsible for one's own happiness, and acting impulsively to relieve the anxiety of the moment rather than tolerating anxiety and acting thoughtfully. If the projection process is fairly intense, the child develops stronger relationship sensitivities than his parents. The sensitivities increase a person's vulnerability to symptoms by fostering behaviors that escalate chronic anxiety in a relationship system.

The projection process follows three steps:

1. the parent focuses on a child out of fear that something is wrong with the child;
2. the parent interprets the child's behavior as confirming the fear; and
3. the parent treats the child as if something is really wrong with the child.

These steps of scanning, diagnosing, and treating begin early in the child's life and continue. The parents' fears and perceptions so shape the child's development and behavior that he grows to embody their fears and perceptions. One reason the projection process is a self-fulfilling prophecy is that parents try to "fix" the problem they have diagnosed in the child; for example, parents perceive their child to have low self-esteem, they repeatedly try to affirm the child, and the child's self-esteem grows dependent on their affirmation.

Parents often feel they have not given enough love, attention, or support to a child manifesting problems, but they have invested more time, energy, and worry in this child than in his siblings. The siblings less involved in the family projection process have a more mature and reality-based relationship with their parents that fosters the siblings developing into less needy, less reactive, and more goal-directed people. Both parents participate equally in the family projection process, but in different ways. The mother is usually the primary caretaker and more prone than the father to excessive emotional involvement with one or more of the children. The father typically occupies the outside position in the parental triangle, except during periods of heightened tension in the mother-child relationship. Both parents are unsure of themselves in relationship to the child, but commonly one parent acts sure of himself or herself and the other parent goes along. The intensity of the projection process is unrelated to the amount of time parents spend with a child.
Example:

The case of Michael, Martha, and Amy illustrates the family projection process. Martha's anxiety about Amy began before Amy was born. Martha feared she would transfer inadequacies she had felt as a child, and still felt, to her own child. This was one reason Martha had mixed feelings about being a mother. Like many parents, Martha felt a mother's most important task was to make a child feel loved. In the name of showing love, she was acutely responsive to Amy's desires for attention. If Amy seemed bored and out of sorts, Martha was there with an idea or plan. She believed a child's road to confidence and independence was in the child feeling secure about herself. Martha did not recognize how sensitive she was to any sign in Amy that she might be upset or troubled and how quickly she would move in to fix the problem.

Martha loved Amy deeply. She and Amy often seemed like one person in the way they were attuned to each other. As a very small toddler, Amy was as sensitive to her mother's moods and wants as Martha was to Amy's moods and wants.

[Analysis: Martha's excessive involvement programs Amy to want much of her mother's attention and to be highly sensitive to her mother's emotional state. Both mother and child act to reinforce the intense connection between them.]

At some point in the unfolding of their relationship, Martha began to feel irritated at times by what Martha regarded as Amy's "insatiable need" for attention. Martha would try to distance from Amy's neediness, but not very successfully because Amy had ways to involve her mother with her. Martha flip-flopped between pleading with and cajoling Amy one minute and being angry at and directive of her the next. It seemed to lock them together even more tightly. Martha looked to Michael to take over at such times. Despite calling Amy's need for attention insatiable, Martha felt Amy really needed more of her time and she faulted herself for not being able to give enough. She wanted Michael to help with the task. It bothered Martha if Amy seemed upset with her. Amy's upsets triggered guilt in Martha and a fear that they were no longer close companions. She wanted to soothe Amy and feel close to her.

[Analysis: Martha blames Amy for the demands she makes on her, but at the same time feels she is failing Amy. Martha tries to "fix" Amy's problem by doing more of what she has already been doing and solicits Michael's help in it. Martha is meeting many of her own needs for emotional closeness and companionship through Amy, thus gets very distressed if Amy seems unhappy with her. The marital distance accentuates Martha's need for Amy.]

Martha's second pregnancy changed a reasonably manageable situation into an unmanageable one. The dilemma of meeting the needs of both children seemed impossible to Martha. She felt Amy was already showing signs of "inheriting" her insecurities. How had she failed her?

When it was time for Amy to start school, Martha sought long conferences with the kindergarten teacher to plan the transition. If Amy balked at going to school, Martha became frightened, angry, exasperated, and guilty. The kindergarten teacher felt she understood children like Amy and took great interest in her. Amy was bright, thrived on the teacher's attention, and performed very well in school. Martha had none of these fears when Marie started school and, not surprisingly, none of the school transition problems occurred with her. Marie did not seem to require so much of the teacher's attention; she just pursued her interests.
As Amy progressed through grade school, her adjustment to school seemed to depend heavily on the teacher she had in a particular year. If the teacher seemed to take an unusual interest in her, she performed very well, but if the teacher treated her as one of the group, she would lose interest in her work. Martha focused on making sure Amy got the "right" teacher whenever possible. Marie's performance did not depend on a particular teacher.

[Analysis: Martha's difficulty being a "self" with her children is reflected in her feeling inordinately responsible for the happiness of both children. This makes it extremely difficult for her to interact comfortably with two children. Amy transfers the relationship intensity she has with her mother to her teachers. When a teacher makes her special, Amy performs very well, but without that type of relationship, Amy performs less well. Marie is less involved with her mother and, consequently, her performance is less dependent on the relationship environment at school and at home.]

If Amy complained about the ways other kids treated her in school, Martha and Michael would talk to her about not being so sensitive, telling her she should not care so much about what other people think. If Amy had a special friend, she was extremely sensitive to that friend paying attention to another little girl. Martha lectured Amy about being less sensitive but also planned outings and parties designed to help Amy with her friendships. Michael criticized Martha for this, saying Amy should work out these problems for herself, but he basically went along with all of Martha's efforts.

[Analysis: The parents' words do not match their actions. They lecture Amy about being less sensitive, but the frequent lectures belie their own anxieties about such issues and their doubts about Amy's ability to cope. Amy's sensitivity to being in the outside position in a triangle with her playmates reflects her programming for such relationship sensitivities in the parental triangle.]

Martha and Amy had turmoil in their relationship during Amy's elementary school years, but things got worse in middle school. Amy began having academic problems and complained about feeling lost in the larger school. She seemed unhappy to Martha. Martha talked to Michael and to the pediatrician about getting therapy for Amy. They hired tutors for Amy in two of her subjects, even though they knew that part of the problem was Amy not working hard in those subjects. When Amy's grades did not improve, Michael criticized her for not taking advantage of the help they were giving and not appreciating them as parents. Martha scolded Michael for being too hard on Amy, but inwardly she felt even more critical of her than Michael did. She had worked hard to prevent these very problems in Amy. How could Amy disappoint her so much? In the summers when there were no academic pressures, Martha and Amy got along much better.

[Analysis: Commonly parents get critical of a child with whom they have been excessively involved if the child's performance drops. They push for the child to have therapy or tutors rather than think about the changes they themselves need to make. Medicine, psychiatry, and the larger society usually reinforce the child focus by defining the problem as being in the child and by often implying that the parents are not attentive and caring enough.]

The big changes occurred when Amy started high school. Martha felt Amy was telling her less of what was happening in her life and that she was more sullen and withdrawn. Amy also had a new group of girlfriends that seemed less desirable to Martha. Amy had also found boys. Martha and Amy got into more frequent conflicts. Amy felt controlled by her parents, not given the
freedom to make her own decisions, pick her own friends. She resented her mother's obvious intrusions into her room when she was out. She began lying to her mother in an effort to evade her rules. Martha was no longer drinking herself at this point, but worried that Amy was using drugs and alcohol. She challenged Amy about it, but her challenges were met with denials.

When Martha felt particularly overwhelmed by the situation, Michael would step in and try to lay down the law to Amy. He accused Amy of not appreciating all they had done for her and of deliberately trying to hurt them. He wanted to know "why" she disobeyed them. Amy would lash back at her father in these discussions, at which point Martha would intervene. Amy stayed away from the house more, told her parents less and less, and got in with a fairly wild crowd. She acted out some of her parents worst fears, but did not feel particularly good about herself and about what she was doing. Amy felt alienated from her parents. The parents' focus on her deteriorating grades included lectures and groundings, but Amy easily evaded these efforts to control and change her.

[Analysis: The more intense the family projection process has been, the more intense the adolescent rebellion. Parents typically blame the rebellion on adolescence, but the parents reactivity to the child fuels the rebellion as much as the child's reactivity. When the parents demand to know "why" Amy acts as she does, they place the problem in Amy. Similarly, parents often blame the influence of the peer group, which also places the problem outside themselves. Peers are an important influence, but a child's vulnerability to peer pressure is related to the intensity of the family process. The intense family process closes down communication and isolates Amy from the family. This is why a child who is very intensely connected to her parents can feel distant from them. The siblings who are less involved in the family problem navigate adolescence more smoothly.]

Michael and Martha became increasingly critical of Amy, but also latched onto any signs she might be doing a little better. They gave her her own phone, bought the clothes she "just had to have," and gave her a car for her sixteenth birthday. Many of these things were done in the name of making Amy feel special and important, hoping that would motivate her to do better. Throughout all the turmoil surrounding Amy, Marie presented few problems.

[Analysis: The parents' permissiveness is just as important in perpetuating the problems in Amy as the critical focus on her. As a teenager, Amy is just as critical of her parents as they are of her. Marie is a more mature person than Amy, but she is not free of the family problem; for example, she sides with her parents in blaming Amy for the family turmoil.]
From: Andrea Maloney-Schara, LCSWA:

Parents often see problems in children. Where are the problems? Is it in the relationship or in the child? Perhaps it is a bit in each.

One can sense the problems in others. The look, the tone of voice, may make a fact out of an opinion. Feeling oriented people have more difficulty with the opinions of important others. A feeling oriented wife can have a feeling oriented husband who denies feelings and thereby intensifies his wife’s feelings. She has to verbalize the feelings for both of them. The opposite can also happen whereby a wife can be totally unaware of her emotional intensity and the husband’s job is to calm his wife down and ask her to think carefully about her feelings. Over all in most marriages opposites attract.

If the marital relationship is not strong enough to manage the anxiety then often the mother and sometimes the father can take a dislike to something in one of the children. Often the intensity of the negativity towards a child has more to do with the parents ability to mage self than with the child’s behavior.

Perhaps stories can make the point. A mother is tired and cold and so she automatically senses that the child is cold. She tells the child to put on a sweater. The child says that she is not cold. The mother gets mad and says, "you will get a cold and be sick and will not be able to do well in school etc."

Mother can sometimes be heard to say to an unborn child, “you will always be my baby.” The life course of the child is filled with the mother’s attempts to help and coddle that special child.

The father participates by, 1) saying nothing, 2) taking mom's side and forcing the child to accept the help or 3) taking on the mother and her anxiety and thereby decreasing the projection process but increasing the anxiety in the marriage.

There are other examples of projection in families were there is violence or incest with children. Often the mother is weak and angers the father who sees the child as part of the mother and not a separate person. The father will then beating the favorite child or taking them on as a special compensation for the mothers lack of warmth.

In projection the major mechanism is the dissolving of boundaries between self and other, assuming one knows who the other is, and further what the child or group needs or should have. Projection is the greatest threat to the future development of the child or the social group. For leaders there is no free ride as anxiety has to be processed in relationships or become fodder for symptoms.