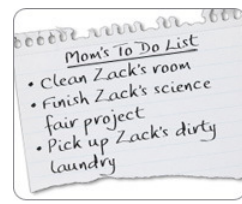


November Counselor's Corner

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Learned Helplessness Part II: Are You Doing Too Much for Your Child?

By Debbie Pincus, MS LMHC from www.empoweringparents.com

This year, Elementary Counseling is focusing on The Total Transformation Parenting Program. We will be sending home some of our favorite articles for you to get inspired by. Please look out for our upcoming parenting programs that support these newsletters.

Are You in Your Child's "Box"?

I talk a lot about "getting into your child's box," and why we should avoid doing so. This means stepping over your own boundaries or your child's—or letting him step over yours. You're getting into a space that actually belongs to him and not to you. Why do we do this? The truth is, we get in there to calm *ourselves* down, not because it's in the best interests of our child. Some typical ways you may invade your child's boundaries would be to constantly hover, treat him as if he knows less than he does, and have his success define you. When you get into your child's box, you're trying to rescue, protect, and fix and doing for them what they can already do for themselves. You tend to believe that without your efforts, they wouldn't be able to succeed.

1) Recognize that you are doing too much, particularly when anxiety is high. Own it. Stop thinking that over-functioning is a virtue and change your part of the pattern by not rescuing, fixing, mediating, or lecturing. You have to be an observer of the pattern. Pay attention to your contribution to the problem and make a conscious effort to take responsibility for only what belongs to you.

At this stage, it's less about pulling back and more about observing the pattern that you see in your family and thinking about a plan of action. So the next time your daughter comes to you asking your advice on how to handle a difficult situation, you change your patterned response of taking control and telling her what to do. Instead of immediately giving advice, you might plan to say, "I don't know, I would have to think about that." Stop being a "Mr. Fix-it" and hand your child back the responsibility to struggle to find her own answers and solutions.

2) Don't let "change back" derail you. Don't be surprised to find that when you do stop your part of the pattern, your children may try to test you and change you back by making you feel guilty, getting sick, and under-functioning more. This is called "change back," and it's basically your child's reaction to the change he sees in you. Let's face it, change is uncomfortable—and when you stop doing so much for your child, he'll have to start doing more for himself. While he will likely test you to see if he can get you to take on his responsibilities, remember that staying in your own box is what's best for both of you in the long run.

3) Expect it to hurt. None of this is easy. You will probably feel the emotional pain of letting go of your role as an over-functioner and watching your child flounder for awhile. You might even experience feelings of depression, anxiety and anger because you're getting in touch with your own vulnerabilities. Understand that many over-functioners hide a lot of their insecurities. It's hard to own up to the fact that we don't always know things or that we feel helpless and at a loss at times. Be prepared that these feelings may come to the surface as you start to do things differently.

4) Don't hesitate. Just start. How do you get started? Just start. Do one thing differently. When you're ready to pull back and start doing less, I think it's always better to just begin. Play a different part in the typical role you've played. Begin acting differently: be responsible but don't rescue. When your child comes to you for help, just listen and don't jump in and fix things. You will have to learn how to soothe yourself while watching him struggle or you might give in to the temptation of functioning for him. When your child whines about homework, don't sit down and do it for him. Help, but don't take over. This doesn't mean that you will detach completely—you're still there for your child, but you're not fixing things for him all the time. One word of caution: many times, people who are over-functioners try to change their role by withdrawing. Remember that you want to do this in a way that's still loving and connected.

5) Expect Push Back when You Pull Back: It's important to recognize that pulling back will initially cause a problem. Realize that when you do this, you're changing a system that's been in place for a long time. Like a machine, every part of the family system has its function. And when one person starts to change their part of it, it's very threatening to the rest because that means everything has to change. And let's face it, nobody wants change.

What pushback can you expect? Your child might get sick, whine or argue with you more, and act even more helpless at first. It will be very tempting to slip back into your old role if you're addicted to being the person that does everything. But try to resist the urge to DO and do the opposite action, which is to NOT DO. Remind yourself that you're not going to do things for your child that you know he can—and should—do for himself. Just think, "If I do this for my child now, how will he be able to do it for himself later?"

6) Stay in your own box: How do you know if your child is capable or competent at a task? Once they know how to do something, like tying their shoe, then it's not your box. Once your child has learned something and you've helped them learn it, then it's their responsibility. That doesn't mean you can't give them guidance or say, "Is there any way I can be helpful to you here?" But generally, this task is theirs now. You don't need to be doing something for them that they can do for themselves.

When you find yourself about to jump in and take charge, stop and ask yourself, "Does this belong to me or to my child? Am I doing this to calm myself down because I feel less anxious when I know they're going to do well? Do I feel like this is somehow my responsibility? Am I doing this because it's in my best interest, or *their* best interest? Am I in my child's box?"

Talking to Your Child about Pulling Back

If you want to talk to your child about the fact that you're stepping back and letting them take care of themselves more, you can say, "I know you want me to pick up your dirty clothes around the house like I've done in the past, but it's no longer my job to do. I want to help you to grow up to be a responsible kid. Someday, you're going to have to take care of yourself and I'm not going to be here to do it." Then, don't engage in it. Don't take it on. If your child doesn't do it, let him experience the natural consequences.

Another thing you can say to your child to encourage and support him is, "I know you can do this. I think I've been doing too much for you. I've seen you do it before. I have a lot of faith that you'll figure it out. You're a good problem solver; I'm sure you'll solve this problem, too. I believe in you."

And as for yourself, this is a time to get focused on your own goals and development. Your child will benefit as he sees you taking good care of the things that belong in your own box.