

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

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Kids Need Parents with Boundaries: Part I

by Wendy Copeland, MA, LPC, ITC

Boundaries & Property Lines

Boundaries clarify where we begin and end in relationship with ourselves, others, and the world. Boundaries define what is in a person's realm of influence, control, and responsibility, and what is not. In life, we see physical boundaries all around us. A practical example of a physical boundary is a property line. If you purchase a house on a plot of land, official documents will be drawn that specify the boundaries of your property. These boundaries inform the owner (and the public) of how far your yard and property extends. This information clarifies what you own and are responsible for in terms of caring for your lawn, landscaping, house, and so forth. If we lived in a society where property lines were not specified, there would be civil disagreements between neighbors, arguing over property ownership, trespassing, and the like.

Likewise, a boundary is a property line that defines a person. Boundaries define where one person ends and another begins. Boundaries also protect, much like a fence both defines and protects a property. Well-known psychologists and authors Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend are regarded as experts on boundaries and have written many books on the topic. Cloud and Townsend explain that truly responsible people take ownership for their feelings, attitudes, behaviors, choices, limits, talents, thoughts, desires, values and loves. Further, they say that a truly responsible person who takes ownership for these areas is the kind of person with whom people *want* to have a relationship. Responsible, well-boundaried individuals tend to be grounded, solid, secure, winsome, self-controlled and emotionally and relationally safe. In short, well-boundaried people are people of character.

Boundaries: A Legacy from Parents to Kids

Most parents, if surveyed, would probably say that they hope to raise well-boundaried children who are grounded, solid, secure, winsome, self-controlled and emotionally and relationally safe. In the same survey, they might also admit that this seems like an incredibly daunting task! One reason for this might be that we ourselves, as parents, are not always grounded, solid, secure, winsome, self-controlled and emotionally and relationally safe. Helping children to have healthy boundaries where they take ownership for themselves, their own struggles, feelings, attitudes, and so on is indeed extremely challenging. After all, we may tend to struggle with blaming and externalizing our problems, too.

This leads to a crucial point about parenting. Cloud and Townsend penned it this way: *"To develop a child of good character, we have to be parents of good character. To develop boundaries in our children, we have to have boundaries."*

The Truth about Parenting and Behavior

If I were a yoga instructor, this is the point where I would instruct everyone to take a deep breath and prepare for a stretch. Alright. Take a deep, deep breath. Ready? Here's the truth: Your child is reacting to your parenting. In understanding boundaries, you need to interpret your child's behavior as a response to your own. This is not to make any parent feel guilty. Rather, in helping our children, we need to understand that the most essential ingredient of helping children learn boundaries is *having a parent with boundaries.*

Although many other factors can influence your child, such as their environment, peer culture, family context, socioeconomic status, innate personality, biophysiology, and historical experience, your child's relationship with you has an immense direct and primary influence. For many parents, this is a huge shift in thinking, as we typically look at a person's actions in terms of his or her motives, needs, personality, and circumstances, not our own. Whether you have a child with boundary difficulties or you simply want to help your child become more responsible, understanding your role in their character and boundary formation is crucial.

Treatment for

Depression
Anxiety / Panic Attacks
Eating Disorders
Bi-polar Disorder
Obsessive –
Compulsive
Disorder
Compulsive Behaviors
such as sexual
addiction
Post-traumatic Stress
Disorder from past
abuse
Relational issues
Adjustment to life
changes

Ages Served

Adult
Adolescent
Children ages 10 & up

Having Boundaries, Teaching Boundaries

There is much to say about boundaries. For now, though, let's focus on how parents can have boundaries *so that* they can impart boundaries to their children.

1. Modeling

Many experts in the field of psychology actually say that, as children, we learn more about relationships not by what happens to us, but what we observe from our parents. Continuing this thought, children observe and learn from how you operate with relationships and boundaries in your own world.

Children notice how you treat other adults in your life. This includes how you treat your spouse, your adult siblings, your parents, your friends, people in the general market place, such as the grocery clerk or the fast food cashier, your boss, their teachers at school, and so on. Your child will also notice how you treat other children, including their own friends and especially their siblings. They also notice how you behave in public as opposed to private. They observe your degree of self-control with your temper and emotions, your language, and your impulses, such as with food, entertainment, or purchasing. Children notice what we give into. They observe our ability to be self-controlled, responsible, and respectful. In short, we model how to live.

2. Internalizing

Internalizing means to take an understanding learned externally and make it a part of yourself. For example, a young girl told by her parents, family, and friends that she is pretty may internalize a belief and self-concept that she is attractive and wanted. Conversely, a child who is teased and told that she is too heavy or “fat” repeatedly may internalize that she is unattractive and undesirable. Internalizing is learned through experience, and it involves understanding. This is very different than an intellectual knowledge. For example, you can read a dictionary definition of romantic love and have an intellectual knowing, but this is completely different from experiencing romantic love for yourself.

Boundaries can only be internalized by experiential knowing. If you are attempting to teach values through words, but not in practice, your efforts will be in vain. Lecturing and nagging kids cannot accomplish internalized boundaries. However, if you “do” boundaries with your children, they will internalize the experiences, process them, and make them a part of how they view reality. This requires parents to hold their ground and apply real-life limits even when it is uncomfortable and hard. As Cloud and Townsend phrase it, “You are like an oak tree that the child runs her head into over and over again, until she realizes that the tree is stronger than she is, and she walks around it next time.”

3. Being a Firefighter: Facing the Heat to Help Your Child

There is an old saying that goes, “If you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen.” Parenting is tough work. Part of the heat is enduring and tolerating your child's seemingly allergic response to boundaries. Parents and children have very different assignments. The child has a developmental job to test the boundaries and thus your resolve, so that she can learn reality. Your job is to withstand the test, which includes handling protests of anger, pouting, and tantrums.

Parents who understand that their children have a developmental task to test and learn experientially do not regard the protests as unusual or label their children as “bad.” Rather, they hold firm in their boundaries and respond proactively and consistently with consequences that reflect reality. This provides children with predictable structure to learn the bounds of self and their world.

Teaching boundaries is very difficult work. Our children do not make it easy for us! Most parents will struggle in maintaining boundaries and training their children to develop their own. In a follow-up article about parenting and boundaries, we will look at some of the common obstacles or pitfalls parents encounter when teaching boundaries to children. Until then, keep up your courage and resolve, your children need to experience healthy boundaries with you...together, in your “kitchen!”

Recommended Reading:

Boundaries With Kids, Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend

Boundaries With Teens, Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend



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