

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

By Wendy Copeland, MA, LPC, ITC

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**David T. Tharp,
M.D., M.Div.,**

**Board Certified
Psychiatrist**

Medical Director



*Wendy Copeland,
MA, LPC, ITC*

Staff Therapist



Wendy Copeland, MA, LPC, ITC
Verified - Data

**Stonebriar Psychiatric
Services, PA**

3550 Parkwood Blvd.
Suite 705
Frisco, TX 75034

Phone
972-335-2430

E-mail
NewsletterQuestions@
stonebriarps.com

We're on the Web!
www.stonebriarps.com

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Boundaries with Kids & Teens: The Difference between Hurt and Harm

By Wendy Copeland, MA, LPC, ITC

In previous articles on parenting, we have tackled some of the tough issues about holding boundaries and limits with our children. We identified how our children's behavior is a *reaction to our parenting*. Three main ways of imparting boundaries to our children were also discussed. These include: teaching, modeling, and helping them to internalize limits for themselves. We underscored that our children learn more by what is "caught" from us than what is verbally "taught." This truth can be both empowering and incredibly intimidating, placing a high calling on us as parents to make sound decisions in our own behavior as well as with regard to how we discipline our children.

We also learned in a previous article about one of the major pitfalls in setting boundaries: *depending on a child or teen for our emotional well-being*. This arises when a parent needs a child's love, affirmation, or emotional closeness to fill their own unmet needs. This is a blind spot for many, many parents. ANY parent who is not addressing these normal needs for love and connection through healthy adult relationships and emotional self-care is susceptible to this. Due to life circumstances, some parents may be especially at-risk for transferring emotional dependence to their children. This may include single parents, divorced parents, the widowed, and parents who are married but have a strained, highly conflicted or emotionally distant marriage. Also at high-risk are spouses in marriages touched by addiction (e.g., alcohol, drugs, prescription abuse, pornography, or sex addiction). Such marriages can leave spouses at a serious deficit for emotional security.

Providing our children with loving limits where they can understand reality, grow, flourish, and accept increasing amounts of personal responsibility is challenging work. As parents, this tests our mettle. Further, the parenting process can surface painful feelings from our own past, preventing us from parenting to our own child's specific needs. Let's look at one more potential challenge in giving our children and teens the gift of healthy boundaries.

Over identifying with Your Child or Teen's Emotions

Parents may not provide appropriate boundaries and limits for their children when they *over identify* or *project* their feelings onto their children. ***When parents cannot endure or tolerate seeing their child emotionally distressed, they may be projecting their own pain onto the child.*** Emotions such as sadness, loss, anger, frustration, and hurt are to be expected and should be regarded as part of a child's normal emotional experience. These are real emotions that we can expect to encounter throughout our lives.

Let's look at an example of a parent who struggles with over identifying. Sandy is a wife and mother. Her son is now three and she finally agrees to a brief get-away anniversary weekend with her husband, Tom. They have secured Tom's parents as the caregivers, and the child is very comfortable with his grandparents. Upon the couple leaving and saying goodbye, their toddler son screams and clings to his mother. Sandy witnesses the tears welling up in her son's eyes and she hears his anxious, pained high-pitched cry. She fears that her son feels abandoned by her. She can't bear for him to think or feel this way. Sandy starts to second-guess her decision, knowing how hurt and lost she felt

Treatment for

Depression
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 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

when her parents left for weekend trips. Sandy is over identifying with her son's emotional reaction to her leaving.

Hurt versus Harm: Knowing the Difference

In this example, Sandy's own childhood is surfacing in the present-day. Growing up, Sandy's parents were weekend jazz performers and they regularly left her with caregivers to perform out-of-town gigs. She would be passed around to different caregivers – neighbors, friends, and sometimes relatives. She missed her parents terribly and came to dread the weekends.

Sandy was truly *harmed* by her parents' constant absence in her young life. She struggled with fear of abandonment and felt anxious whenever her parents were away. Her whole life, she has struggled with fearing that those she loves will leave her. She tends to feel anxious when her husband or child is away. As a sensitive mother of her own son, Sandy has worked intentionally to provide consistent, loving care for her child. She rarely is away from him. Her son is not accustomed to her leaving and he is upset about it. This can be quite normal for a close bond between parent and child. However, Sandy's son needs to learn that he will be okay without her, that he can enjoy his grandparents in her absence, and that he can depend upon her returning. He may feel *hurt* by her leaving, but he is in no way *harmed*. Sandy and her son can learn that being separate is not "bad," but rather good for his maturation and good for their relationship. Also, Sandy's marriage needs the exclusive time alone together to reconnect and rekindle...if only she can allow herself to steal away with her husband.

Do you ever over identify with your child or teen's emotional distress? Do you find yourself lessening a consequence or giving in for the sake of their feelings? Do you overcompensate or overlook your own needs to the point of feeling depleted or at times resentful? Do you worry that negative feelings will harm them and they will spiral down emotionally or get out of control?

If so, you may want to ask yourself if you are trying to protect your child from feelings that were actually painful or dangerous for you in your own past. This is worth addressing and working through for your own personal growth and so that they do not skew or hinder the parenting of your own child. Since our kids did not grow up as we did, they do not need to be parented as if they experienced our losses. Thankfully, we can tailor our parenting for what they need – not what we needed.

We can help children by supporting them *through* their feelings, as opposed to rescue them *from* their feelings. In this way, we teach that feelings cannot drown us, overpower us, or harm us. We teach them that feelings are natural and normal and can be felt, dealt with, and moved through safely with loving support. Sometimes we have to learn this for ourselves so that we can pass it on to our children.



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