

I'm going to make your parenting so much easier!

I'm betting if you are finding parenting draining, exhausting, and unfulfilling and you have visions of throwing your children out a window (hey, who hasn't!), you are making your parenting a lot harder than it has to be. How? Because you are taking way too much responsibility.

We fall into one of the deepest and most unforeseen traps of parenting when we don't know how to draw boundaries between us and our children so that we know whose problem is whose and allow the owner of the problem to solve his or her own. The initial fault lies with parents who think they must—in fact, think that it is their duty to—take responsibility for their children. You're thinking right now, *What is she talking about? Of course I take responsibility for my children. That's what a parent must do.* I beg to differ. If you set clear boundaries, your life will change, you will enjoy your children more, and you will experience the fulfillment in parenting you have been longing for.

Here's the deal: You are not responsible for your child, his feelings, his thoughts or even his behavior—and certainly not his happiness. The hard part is that you are responsible for every word you say and everything you do. It takes knowing what is your problem and what is your child's. Every time an incident happens, ask yourself, *whose problem is it?* If your children are fighting, it's their problem; if your child hasn't cleaned up after himself, it's yours; if she's anxious about everything, it's hers; if table manners are atrocious, it's yours; if he is having a hard time with friends, it's his. And the most important one: whenever your child is exhibiting inappropriate behavior, it means he is *having* a problem, not *being* a problem.

This does not mean that when your child has a problem, you wash your hands of her and walk away. But if you know that the issue is her problem, you will be far more helpful to her in managing or solving it if you do not try to fix it, get into it with her or deny it. Of course, we are responsible for their care—nurturing, providing, and raising them to be good citizens. But when we take responsibility for everything they do, it means it is our job to make them happy. An impossible task, but most parents I know will go to extremes to ensure that happiness.

When we feel responsible for their anger, their “laziness”, their homework, their slovenliness, their rude remarks, etc., it means we take their behavior personally and react emotionally in an attempt to control and change that behavior—it’s called a power struggle. We are so quick to get involved, to try to get them to see it our way, to make the sadness go away, to stop the behaviors we hate, that we lose sight of what is their problem to fix and what is ours.

Whoever has the initial issue or upset is the owner of the problem. But way too often we try to make other people responsible for our problems.

“How many times do I have to tell you to get off that computer and do your chores? Why won’t you ever do what I say?” This is a perfect example of not understanding whose problem is whose. Your child doesn’t want to get off the computer and certainly doesn’t want to do chores. *You* want these things to happen. So, it’s *your* problem. By talking to him this way, you are dumping your problem on him trying to make it his. He knows it, thinks it’s unfair and resists. When you understand boundaries, his resistance is completely understandable. Does that mean he shouldn’t do chores and you should leave him alone? Absolutely not. But when you know it’s your problem, not his, you approach it very differently and more cooperation is the result.

“I’m concerned that you are spending too much time on the computer, and I also notice that your jobs are not getting done. I want to talk about this and come up with an agreement that works for both of us.” Sound a little Pollyanna-ish? Maybe because it’s so respectful. How many of us talk with respect to our kids? If not, that’s something to think about. He will be far more cooperative when he hears you asking him to help you with your problem.

I know, you’re saying, “But his chores *are* his problem.” No, they’re his job, not his problem. His anger at having to turn off his video game is his problem—not yours. But most of us make it our problem when we nag and push and add more fuel to the situation. When you expect him to get off the computer when you say (and cheerfully), you are asking him to take care of your problem. When you either give in to avoid the meltdown and do his chores yourself or yell at him for getting so upset, you are taking responsibility for his problem and not allowing him to handle.

A good boundary means I am not responsible for my child's problems, happiness or unhappiness—she is, and she is not responsible for my problems, happiness or unhappiness—I am. Blame diminishes, kindness and respect grow, fights disappear, and we become helpers of each other's problems in ways that feel supportive and loving.