

# Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

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## **Kids Need Parents with Boundaries: Part II**

by Wendy Copeland, MA, LPC, ITC

### *Borders and Boundaries*

Let's be honest. Parenting is intensely challenging work. As parents, one of the most difficult balancing acts is helping children to understand the boundaries and borders of their world. Whether we intend to or not, we serve as virtual placeholders of reality for our children. We "hold" reality for our children by allowing them to encounter and work through challenges to increasing degrees. For example, a three-year-old may wrestle with having to eat her green beans before she is permitted dessert. It is up to her to "earn" her own dessert. For the 16-year-old, it is up to her to complete her chores and homework before going out with friends on Saturday evening. If she chooses to complete her responsibilities in a time-sensitive manner, she also chooses to have time with her friends on Saturday evening.

If we provide reasonably healthy boundaries, we help our children gain a realistic understanding of their own limitations and their personal power. To the degree that we *shield* them from reality or *permit* the experiencing of reality, they gain an understanding of self in the world. When parents have healthy boundaries, their offspring are more likely to develop and grow in adaptive and healthy ways. This is because parents with healthy boundaries more accurately represent reality to their children. The responsibility to protect, nurture, develop and build awareness in our children in age-appropriate ways is immense.

Some common life lessons that can be learned from well-boundaried parents include how to respect self and others, accepting limits and appropriate authority, being assertive and understanding innate individual rights, delaying immediate gratification in order to achieve goals, and developing and maintaining healthy and loving relationships. Parenting with boundaries requires an artful balance of self-awareness, attunement to the child, love, and commitment to the long, winding journey toward independence.

### *Everyone Struggles with Boundaries... even Parents!*

Learning how to "hold" reality for our children sometimes means allowing them to wrestle with reality's consequences without prematurely rescuing them. Effectively holding reality for our children also requires being strong yet empathic, attuned, and available as parents. There is unique irony in this: In order to be a placeholder parent for our children, we need to be placeholder parents for ourselves. That is, we need to keep boundaries for ourselves and be aware of when and where this is more challenging due to our own weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and emotional needs.

To be sure, to some degree all adults struggle with providing balance and boundaries for themselves. We, too, can be resentful of boundaries or limitations. We may try to curtail reality in a number of ways to make ourselves feel better. We might overindulge throughout the week on food, overspend on a credit card when we really do not have the money, deny responsibility in our personal relationships, tend to blame others, feel entitled or be demanding, or perhaps try to "get around the system" when we are limited by circumstances beyond our control. This is exactly why, as adults, learning to accept and adjust to reality is immensely helpful to our children's development. When we "get it," they are more likely to "get it." As we live honestly and courageously in the world and in relationships, our children are able to witness and internalize reality

based limits. Below, we will focus on one specific and potentially toxic parenting pitfall that can seriously sabotage a child's growth.

### **Pitfall #1: Dependency on the Child**

Of all the ingredients for growth and development, love ranks supreme. Scientifically, we know that babies who are deprived of love and attention can literally perish. This phenomenon is called failure to thrive. Meeting basic physical care needs is not enough. Love is essential. Yet many parents, though very well-intentioned, confuse love for their children with personal emotional needs. Children are not designed to fulfill a parent's emotional needs or ego needs. They do not have the capability, maturity, knowledge, or skill to provide this for parents in a consistent manner.

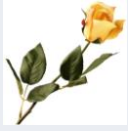
Although all children need family and community to experience healthy relational connection and bonding, they also have a unique developmental imperative to grow up and become increasingly independent. If this were not the case, society as we know it would fold in upon itself. The younger generation would never evolve into caring and competent adults. Instead they would be completely dependent on others for all their needs; the load on society at large would be devastating. To the best of their ability, we need children to grow into mentally, emotionally, and physically competent adults.

As it is, American culture has experienced some significant retardation in this area. Children live longer at home or return to the nest to significantly higher degrees than decades prior. Young adults often turn to their parents in dependent ways; leaving parents feeling stretched and burdened often well into their retirement years. Often our young are not leaving the nest free and clear. We often have fly paper homes. They get stuck – them to us and us to them.

In looking at dependent relationships, we can examine how we as parents can get “stuck” to our children in problematic ways. Parents can fall into the trap of dependency when they confuse emotional closeness with their own emotional needs. Dependency in the parent-child relationship takes place when a parent *needs* a child's closeness or affection to meet their *own unmet needs*. In the book, *Boundaries with Kids* (1998), Cloud and Townsend explain that this is the reverse of how the parenting relationship should be; children become a sort of parent to their parents. They become meets of need far before they are ready for this responsibility.

Unmet emotional needs in parents tend to stem from their own childhood wounding, relationship losses, and hardships. Dependent parents may seek their children's happiness, success, affiliation, affection, or approval in order to feel emotionally secure. In the process, children may unwittingly become primary sources of emotional connection, stability, or love for their parents. Healthy parent-child relationships celebrate individuality and growth within the context of loving limits that facilitate emotional safety and connection. Dependent relationships subvert authentic, nourishing love for the meeting of one's own needs. At their core, dependent relationships are anxious contingencies. The child's experience of love or acceptance is contingent (dependent) upon the parent's emotional needs being addressed.

In the dependent parent-child relationship, the parental demands become a strain on the child emotionally and spiritually. Children may also experience an overload physically, if a parent is seeking a disproportionate amount of physical affection to affirm their closeness, importance, self-worth, etc. However, because children deeply desire and need emotional connection with their parents, they will morph into what the parent needs. Since love and emotional connection is a survival imperative (remember risk of failure to thrive?), children will move in the direction of the relationship and attempt to fulfill all that a given role demands. If a parent has vicarious needs of achievement and success, a child may work diligently to fulfill that parent's dream by bringing home straight A's or the soccer tournament trophy. For these children, performance equals love. This also means that disappointing parents could result in potential loss of approval and loss of love.

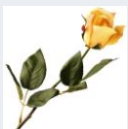


**Treatment for**

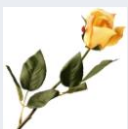
Depression  
Anxiety / Panic Attacks  
Eating Disorders  
Bi-polar Disorder  
Obsessive –  
Compulsive Disorder  
Compulsive Behaviors  
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addiction  
Post-traumatic Stress  
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If a parent has unmet needs for security and emotional connection, the child may learn how to soothe or comfort in order to reduce parental anxiety or emotional distress. There are numerous examples of this. An example might be the child of divorce that learns to stop mentioning his mother, because this sends father into a rage. Or, perhaps the teenage daughter who forgoes going to the homecoming dance with her friends because Dad is out of town again and Mom is feeling lonely and sad. Or, the four-year-old son of an alcoholic who learns that bringing a beer to Dad keeps him laughing and stops the fighting with Mom. If parents cannot or will not care for themselves, children will learn the roles that best suit their parents’ needs. *Children need their parents and they are most excellent understudies.*

As the ever-ready understudy, children of dependent parents carry an undying hope. This is an unconscious hope. The hope is not formed into words yet, but will drive a child to fill the care giving role that a parent needs. If the hope could be expressed in words, it might go something like this:  
***“If I take care of my parent and be for them what they need me to be, then maybe someday they will become whole and well enough to take care of me. Then, I can finally relax, feel secure and safe, and be a child again.”***

Sadly, this dream cannot be realized through the child’s own efforts. Since children were never designed with the capability to meet adult needs, they can never fulfill the role that was intended for an adult. Instead, they get caught in a dance with their parents. Feelings of incompetence, insecurity, anxiety, anger, and depression are extremely common in children of emotionally dependent parents. As these children grow into adults, they may feel resentful, angry, emotionally stuck, and ill-equipped for the demands of adulthood. They also tend to select romantic partners who will be co-dependent with them. The hope has never left them and so they begin the dance again, this time with a partner that has the potential to bring love and security. If they remain unconscious of their own needs and relationship patterns, they will struggle in a dance that brings similar, painful feelings as that of childhood.

As parents, we have a responsibility to care for ourselves so that we can care for our children. If our emotional needs are not being met in healthy, appropriate ways, we risk turning to our children, who are unequipped to meet complicated, adult-sized emotional needs. We risk skewing boundaries and replacing potentially vibrant relationships with fixed roles. These emotional contingencies undermine what could be safe, secure, and joyful parent-child relationships. For most parents, the thought of placing our children in jeopardy is incomprehensible. We work diligently to protect them from all sorts of danger. In the same way that we ensure their physical health, we can invest in our children’s mental and emotional health and help secure their safety. Through awareness of needs (self and child), respect for differences, boundaries and limits, emotional self-regulation and self-care, and nurturing (contingency-free) love, we can help our children to not only thrive but joyfully live!

**Recommended Reading:**

- Boundaries with Kids, Cloud and Townsend
- Boundaries with Teens, Cloud and Townsend
- Safe People, Cloud and Townsend



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