

Moving Towards Healthier Boundaries

The Dorm Parent Collective

Defining “Boundaries”

A simple summary of what it means to have healthy boundaries with your young adult child entails **owning your needs, being able to say no when you want to say no, and being able to say yes when you want to say yes.**

ie. limits or ‘rules’ we set for ourselves in relationships; define where things like personhood, identity, & control begin and end relative to another person.

This is hard! Especially when our loved ones are struggling because we may fear saying no will lead to them struggling more, loving us less, hurting themselves, or worse.

AND - if we fall into this trap and begin to move away from healthy boundaries (or stay in unhealthy boundaries), the treatment journey, and our loved one’s distress, will likely extend further.

Types of Boundaries

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- Psychological: share info about self, thoughts, opinions, & beliefs
 - Emotional: how much you let others affect you or manipulate your feelings
 - Physical: space, touch
 - Topic Related: money, religion, politics, etc.
 - Time Boundaries
 - Material: limits you set on how much \$ or resources you give
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Rigid Boundaries

- Avoids intimacy and close relationships
 - Unlikely to ask for help
 - Has few close relationships
 - Very protective of personal information
 - Maybe isolated/disengaged from young adult, or have such firm boundaries that it is hard for a connection to sustain itself
 - Keeps others at a distance to avoid rejection
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Porous Boundaries

- Overshares personal information
 - Difficulty saying “no” to the requests of others
 - Overinvolved with other people’s problems
 - Dependent on the opinion of others
 - Accepting of abuse or disrespect
 - Fears rejection if they do not comply with others
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Healthy, Flexible Boundaries

- Values own opinions
- Doesn't compromise values for others
- Shares personal information appropriately for situation / relationship
- Knows personal wants and needs and can communicate them
- Accepting when others say "no"

Healthy boundaries provide a loved one with safety & comfort.

The impact of various boundary types on each party

Rigid boundaries by the parent:

- Exerting too much control by *helicoptering*
- Can demonstrate lack of healthy affection/ touch
- More critical than affirming

Results on child:

- Dependency and fear of failure
 - Perfectionism can develop, as this style of parenting associates a child's value with their performance.
 - Adults raised in this environment can experience stunted creativity.
 - Can impede intimacy
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The impact of various boundary types on each party

Porous or inconsistent boundaries by the parent:

- Providing too much freedom
- One parent is strict while the other is more porous
- Inconsistency in limit setting due to behavior changes related to substance abuse.

Results on the child:

- Hard time accepting “no”
 - Lack of “self protective” skills
 - Lack of awareness of the limit where their responsibilities begin and end.
 - Increase chance of high risk behavior
 - Self esteem can be dependent on the opinion of others.
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Testing Limits

What happens when our children test the limits?

In general, folks struggle when boundaries are strengthened. Usually more challenges going from porous to healthy than from rigid to healthy.

- Name your boundaries- articulate your boundaries be clear.
 - Talk.
 - Let go of the result- its more about the assertion of your boundaries.
 - State, Debate, Relate
 - DEAR MAN (DBT Skill)
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DEAR MAN

A way to remember these skills is to remember the term **DEAR MAN**:

Describe
Express
Assert
Reinforce
(Stay) Mindful
Appear Confident
Negotiate

Describe

Describe the current **SITUATION** (if necessary). Stick to the facts.
Tell the person exactly what you are reacting to.

"You told me you would be home by dinner but you didn't get here until 11."

Express

Express your **FEELINGS** and **OPINIONS** about the situation.
Don't assume that the other person knows how you feel.

"When you come home so late, I start worrying about you."

Use phrases such as "*I want*" instead of "*You should*," "*I don't want*" instead of "*You shouldn't*."

Assert

Assert yourself by **ASKING** for what you want or **SAYING NO** clearly.
Do not assume that others will figure out what you want.
Remember that others cannot read your mind.

"I would really like it if you would call me when you are going to be late."

Reinforce

Reinforce (reward) the person ahead of time (so to speak)
by explaining positive effects of getting what you want or need.
If necessary, also clarify the negative consequences of not getting
what you want or need.

"I would be so relieved, and a lot easier to live with, if you do that."

Remember also to reward desired behavior after the fact.

(Stay)

Mindful

Keep your focus **ON YOUR GOALS**.
Maintain your position. Don't be distracted. Don't get off the topic.

"Broken record": Keep asking, saying no, or expressing your opinion *over and over and over*.
Just keep replaying the same thing again and again.

Ignore attacks: If another person attacks, threatens, or tries to change the subject,
ignore the threats, comments, or attempts to divert you.
Do not respond to attacks. Ignore distractions.
Just keep making your point.

"I would still like a call."

Appear confident

Appear **EFFECTIVE** and competent.

Use a confident voice tone and physical manner;
make good eye contact.

No stammering, whispering, staring at the floor, retreating.

No saying, "I'm not sure," etc.

Negotiate

Be willing to **GIVE TO GET**.
Offer and ask for other solutions to the problem.
Reduce your request.
Say no, but offer to do something else or to solve the problem another way.
Focus on what will work.

"How about if you text me when you think you might be late?"

Turn the tables: Turn the problem over to the other person.
Ask for other solutions.

"What do you think we should do? . . . I can't just stop worrying about
you [or I'm not willing to]."

Where Parents Get Stuck

Common Pitfalls:

- Deviating from the plan- falling back into old dynamics
- Forgetting, losing sight of the plan
- Parents not being on same page
- Giving in to emotional manipulation
- Feeling disempowered in the relationship

Navigating Changing Roles

- Leave space for personal life choices / respect their autonomy
 - Offer advice only when asked
 - Recognize changing dynamics, hierarchy, & roles
 - Set emotional boundaries: you are not responsible for their happiness
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Examples

Healthy

“Please don’t ask me again, my answer won’t change right now.”

“It’s okay for you to come home to use the laundry, provided you give at least a days notice.”

“If you don’t complete the return to school paperwork, then it won’t get done and you won’t be able to return to school.”

Unhealthy

“If you get an A on your paper, then I will be so proud of you”.

“If you bought me more clothes, I would feel better about myself.”

“You would let me go away for the weekend, if you wanted me to be happy”.

Questions to Consider

1. How would you describe/define your current boundary “type” with your child? Does this extend to others in your life, or do you notice specific and unique trends between you and your child?
 2. What would be the most difficult part of shifting your boundary “style”? What comes up around boundaries that feels intimidating or even scary to change?
 3. Has your current boundary type with your child always existed as such, or was there a change at some point? What caused the shift and what is causing you to stay stuck (if the current system isn’t working for you)
 4. To develop boundaries for yourself, you have to know what you value, think and where you stand. Are you able to define this for yourself?
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