

## Who owns the problem, the parent or the child?

Picture this scene... a child walks into the room where the parent is and exclaims, "I'm bored!" with full exasperation. After a few moments with no response, the child repeats the phrase a bit louder. (You may have never experienced this before so you might have to imagine this scene.) I offer this scenario to the parents in my parenting class and ask the question, "Who's problem is it that the child is bored?" Amazingly, most answer "it's the child's problem" with a sense of confidence in their voice. But when I ask the group what they might say in response if their child made this statement, many reveal that they would offer their child options or make suggestions of things for them to do. This, in essence, is the parent solving a child's problem and not appropriate at all.

All problems have owners. When a parent takes ownership of problems the child owns, the parent teaches the child that they are not capable and the child grows more needy and dependent on the adult. The child may even grow more demanding if the adult doesn't continue to do things for the child when they want them done. Not sure what it looks like? Just watch any episode of the reality television show *Nanny 911*. A four-year-old demands that his mother put on his socks so he can go out to play. The nanny coaches the mother to stop doing too much for her child so the mother tells the child he can do it himself. He then proceeds to throw a fit and falls on the floor in an uncontrollable rage. The mother can't stand the noise and commotion and breaks down to put the socks on for him.

Back in my parenting class I take the participants through a little exercise called "Guess Who Owns the Problem." The parents are presented with a list of simple situations and have to guess who owns each of the problems presented. The one that causes the greatest challenge is the one that reads; *the child throws a fit in the grocery store, whose problem is it?* Conversation triggered by this question reveals that parents want to stop the tantrum because it may bring attention to them or it may disturb other customers. The bottom line is that the fit belongs to the child and some tantrums occur purposely to get the parent to come and stop them.

Identifying and turning a problem over to the child can be a tough change for some parents. They want to make things all better, take action so things will go smoothly, or fix things because it helps them feel wanted and valuable. But the sooner an adult stops solving a child's problems, the sooner the child learns to become accountable and more capable. In my class, I emphasize the fact that we were each individually made to carry only our own burdens. When we take on the burdens (problems) of another, it overburdens us and weakens the individual the problem belongs to. This concept is often understood more easily by fathers. Mothers find it incredibly difficult to let go and build capable children.

One day when my children were school aged, I decided that I was tired of getting phone calls at my office from them, announcing that they had left a school project or their lunch money at home. I told them that I would no longer run things to school they had forgotten, and that starting immediately; it was their responsibility to remember things on their own. All three accepted this new change until one day when my middle child left her school project on the dining room table and called me at my office. She begged me to bring it to school "just this once," and she promised to remember from now on. I choked up and felt my eyes well up with tears as I stood firm against her pleas to fetch her project, and wished her a good rest of the day. From that day forward she learned to remember for herself.

The next time your child expresses frustration or emotion in response to a problem they own, I suggest you use this simple, 3-step response.

### TELL THEM WHAT YOU SEE

When approached by your child and having determined that she owns the problem she is presenting, use your best parent detective skills to determine what emotion she is feeling at the moment. Then tell her what you see by saying, "It looks like you're sad," or "It looks like you're

disappointed.” This simple step begins to help the child accept that the feelings she is experiencing are normal and acceptable. For younger children, this step is crucial for them to learn how to identify what they are feeling.

#### ASK THEM WHAT THEY CAN DO TO SOLVE THEIR PROBLEM

Sometimes all it takes is to coach them to solve their problems. Listen closely to determine what the root cause of their problem is and help them come up with a solution without doing it for them. If the child is bored, ask him, “what do you think you could do on your own so that you would feel busy?” If they respond by saying “I don’t know,” say to them, “make believe you know.” Granting them permission to use their imagination sometimes works wonders.

#### OFFER TO HELP IF APPROPRIATE

Finally, once they have come up with a solution to their problem, offer to help, and don’t do it for them. If they brought you a minor boo-boo to see and they come up with the solution of a bandage, offer to open the package but let them put it on. The more often you allow your child to solve their own problems, the more capable they become. We must commit to helping our children develop their problem solving skills. We are not always going to be around to do it for them.

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