

When Your Child Hurts Your Feelings



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“Mom, can I have Anthony over tonight?” asks Jeremy, age ten.

“No, it’s too late,” replies his mother. “It’s five o’clock already. You need to plan ahead. I have other things I need to do tonight.”

Jeremy argues the point at some length before shouting, in despair, “Aw, Mom! It’s not fair! Why are you doing this to me! I hate you!”

Jeremy’s mom, a single parent, tells me later about the conversation. “I don’t know what to do or to feel when he says he hates me,” Sally confesses. “It’s just so awful. I wonder whether I’m doing something wrong, but sometimes he blames me for things I have no control over, like having to do overtime at work. Or problems he has with his dad.”

Situations like this one are pure torture for conscientious parents. Sally holds down a high-stress executive job at an insurance company, bringing home work she finishes long after Jeremy’s bedtime. She consoles herself with reminders that her salary covers his private school and lets them travel on vacation together a couple of times a year. In the meantime she sweats bullets to give Jeremy dinners he likes every night and makes sure that his wardrobe, cell phone, and gaming devices pass muster with his peers. “I do the best I can,” she says. She is constantly worrying that her best may not be good enough.

“How do you feel when Jeremy lashes out like that?” I ask.

“Angry. Hurt. Indignant, I guess. Here I am, sweating like a coolie to provide for him. And it’s like he has no idea, like he is maybe royalty and I am just a peon. I want to explain so that he understands better, but of course he’s only ten, and some of the stuff, like my boss’s demands, he can’t understand. And then I start questioning myself.”

It’s important, I tell her, to pay attention to her own feelings. Parenthood is a form of involuntary servitude that scarcely becomes easier when the beneficiary is ungrateful. “Don’t make your appreciation of yourself contingent on his attitude,” I say. “And take his words with a grain of salt. Place the awful remark in the broader context of your relationship. Also consider the possibility that it reflects, not hatred, but something else, such as a sense of powerlessness. After all, once you say no, he has no recourse. And if his father is letting him down, he may send you the anger that belongs to his dad to see whether you, like Dad, will abandon him.”

“So what do I do?” asks Sally anxiously.

“Do the same things you would do at any other time when Jeremy was upset. Try to detach emotionally. You want to avoid a shouting match. Listen to him. Show him that you hear what he is saying. Acknowledge the feelings. Ask questions for clarification.

“In this case you might say, ‘I guess you must be pretty angry with me. I can’t let you have Anthony over, but we can certainly talk about this problem.’ Or if he’s ranting and raving and it doesn’t seem productive to attempt a conversation, you might say, ‘We need to talk about this, but we can’t do it right now, because you’re too upset. Let me know when you feel calmer.’

“Then when he’s ready, you can say, ‘It really hurts me when you say you hate me. I love you so much and I try to take the very best care of you. What can you do to feel better when you are angry without hurting anyone?’ And then you can see what he says.

“You can also do some brainstorming when the dust has settled. You say, ‘How can we avoid this situation in the future so that you get what you want? Let’s see whether we can figure out a way.’ The two of you might decide that if Jeremy wants an overnight guest, he must give you twenty-four hours’ notice and he must pick a Friday or a Saturday.

“The opportunity to enjoy an important privilege can help get you improved performance on other fronts. So you might say that all homework must be completed before the friend comes over or that all household chores must be done.

“The hardest part is to hear Jeremy’s feelings even when you don’t like them. Sometimes, though, you will be able to validate them. You might say, ‘You know what? It really stinks that your father forgot his promise to you. I feel angry and hurt about that, too.’

“Above all, don’t blame yourself. And there are a few other things I would suggest that you not do. Don’t tell him that he doesn’t mean what he said or that he is wrong to feel as he does. Don’t make light of the situation. And don’t justify yourself or become defensive. Stick to your position. Don’t back down. Remember that you’re his parent, not his best buddy.

“You don’t want to make Jeremy responsible for your feelings, either—don’t say, ‘How could you talk to me this way after all I’ve done for you! Can’t you see how you’ve hurt me?’ We are each responsible for our own feelings and how we interpret the words of others. You don’t want your child taking care of you rather than himself.

“If Jeremy consistently feels heard by you, and if you let him learn to solve his own problems, then he will be comfortable bringing you difficult issues later in life. You want him to be able to come to you with anything that is on his mind.

“To create the all-important climate of acceptance, you must be able to hear his feelings while staying in touch with your own—and to report on your own without hurting him. In so doing, you will give him invaluable communication skills and set a powerful example that he will remember in later years when he becomes a parent himself.”

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