

Parenting with the Assumption of Emotional Coherence
Part 3: When You Yourself Are Having Problems

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For an introduction to the concept of emotional coherence, please see:
[*Introduction to the Emotional Coherence Framework.*](#)

This is **part 3** in a series of four articles on parenting with the assumption of emotional coherence. In this article we are no longer discussing (as we did in part 2) those cases in which a child has some urgent or important need for a parent's attention, nor are we considering any extreme behavior on the child's part, but rather situations in which the child's behavior is within the wide range of what is normally considered healthy, and nevertheless, the parents are finding the child's behavior challenging to deal with.

It's easy and tempting for us as parents to label a child as "problematic" when that child does something that we find bothersome, and to blame the child for our discomfort. Let's look at it from a different angle, though: Who's the one who's bothered, annoyed, or uncomfortable? Is the child bothered that he's running around like crazy and making lots of noise? Probably not! It's likely that the child is perfectly happy with his behavior, and the parent is the one who experiences (or "owns") the problem.

Children need to learn that we, as parents, have our own personal boundaries. They therefore need clear information from us as to what we're thinking and how we're feeling. Children (and other people, for that matter) are much more inclined to listen to us if we take ownership of our feelings and explain in a factual manner what's bothering us, rather than assigning blame to the child. When children feel they're being accused of something, they feel backed into a corner and spend lots of valuable energy on trying to defend themselves. They then have little energy for cooperating with their parents.

You can try simply sharing information about your needs, and letting your child decide what to do about it, rather than giving orders. Maybe it's past bedtime for your daughter, and she's getting wilder by the minute. You can say, "It's bedtime, and I'm concerned that you'll be tired tomorrow morning. Besides, Mom and I need less action here so we can talk about a few things." This type of communication about one's own needs and feelings is often referred to as an *I-message*. You're expressing your own feelings and needs and giving your child the opportunity to respond in her own way and to make choices.

It's important to children's development to feel what it's like to exert influence. The more often they have choices, the more often they have the experience of making decisions that have an influence on the environment and on other people. This helps children develop feelings of strength and autonomy.

When we state our needs and desires clearly, we're being good role models for our children. They are learning that openly expressing one's needs and feelings is part of having a close relationship to another person.

Many times children feel responsible for their parents' problems, even when that's not the case. It can be a big relief to your child to have clear information and not have to wonder what he or she did "wrong" to cause you difficulty—because children often tacitly assume that they themselves must be at fault when something feels amiss between them and their parents.

For example, let's imagine you're concerned about your own elderly father, who is seriously ill, and you don't have the energy right now to give your son your full attention. It's helpful for him to hear a message like this: "I'm having trouble being patient right now. I've been worried about Grandpa; you know, he's pretty sick." This provides your child with some important clarity as to why you may have been impatient. It also reduces the likelihood that he will interpret things as meaning that he was the cause of your impatience.

When you're bothered by your child's behavior, it's usually most constructive to concentrate on the "here and now," explaining clearly what feelings or inconveniences you have as a result of what she has done.

Of course there will be times that your child isn't especially interested in how you feel or what you think. That, of course, is an example of your child having particular feelings of his own that simply exist right then, and it's advisable to accept that fact gracefully. If you are in a position, inwardly, to acknowledge that, you might say, "Hmmm. It seems you're not really interested right now in hearing how things feel to me...." Better yet, before starting to tell him about what's bothering you, you can ask, "Are you interested in hearing how I feel?" That gives your child the option of saying no, if that's the honest answer.

This material has been drawn from [How to Connect with Your Child](#) by Robin Ticic.