

Parents: Enabling Your Child Isn't Helping Him

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Being altruistic is a wonderful and rewarding character trait which cannot be paralleled. Abetting another human being, whether he's familiar to you or not, creates a special bond between you and him. This gracious deed is considered to be the pinnacle of kindness. In addition, when you help another person, you feel a certain sense of satisfaction and fulfillment. However, there are times when helping others borders on "enabling." According to Alanon [Alcoholics Anonymous], helping is doing something for someone who is not able to do for himself whether short term or long term. Enabling, or rescuing, is doing something for someone who has the capability to do it for himself but for some reason or reasons, does not. These reasons can vary from feeling entitled, blaming others for his inaction, feeling victimized, being accustomed to being saved and spared by others, or other reasons.

Although the term enabling is primarily utilized with regard to addictive and severe dysfunctional behaviors, parents, teachers, colleagues, friends, and family have at times unconsciously facilitated negative behaviors in their children, spouses, co-workers, parents and students, allowing the undesired results to continue and proliferate. The rationale behind this is to deflect the hand of fate and to ease its blow. For the most part, people have good intentions and want to be helpful especially with respect to their own family members and close relationships. Spouses care for each other and want the best for one another. Teachers are concerned about their students and want the best for them. Parents love their children and want the best for them. So why does enabling occur?

When parents enable or rescue their children, they are taking care of them so that their children do not have to be responsible for their own behavior or emotional state. In essence, parents are shielding their children from any undesirable consequences that they will ultimately experience. Incessantly covering up for a child or spouse by making excuses for his uncompleted assignments or completing them for him is not allowing him to fulfill his obligations and responsibilities. Rationalizing that the child or spouse has viable reasons not to be able to conclude his assignment is not allowing him to fulfill his commitments. Using empty threats with no intention of following through is reinforcing these negative behaviors. Trying to take personal control of the situation without involving the child or spouse is unrealistic, futile, and draining. Parents who always do their children's homework, continually awaken them in the morning well into their upper teen years, make excuses for their obnoxious behaviors, and cover up for their failures whether at work or at school, are enabling their children to stay in their comfort level for the present without ever considering future repercussions. Parents often fall into this pattern to relieve any

doubts about themselves as “good” parents. It has been said that “the degree to which we rescue is the degree to which we ourselves want to be rescued.” Often, parents believe that their child’s behavior reflects their own self worth. In other words, if Joey is a “good boy,” then his parents are “good people.” If Joey acts out, then his parents are not good people. This may be true for teachers and spouses as well. A child who acts out has no reason to change if he never encounters any consequences for his negative behavior. He is therefore enabled to repeat his negative behavior. A parent who continuously rescues his child when he acts out is trying to be a loving parent but on a deeper level is trying to rescue *himself* from the pain of seeing his child self destruct. As enabling behaviors become routine, parents end up feeling angry, frustrated and ineffective. Despite these negative emotions, parents continue enabling so as not to appear unreasonable, callous, unloving or disloyal. Parents often choose the path of least resistance without ever thinking through how this harmful pattern will affect their child in the long run and how it will exacerbate their negative emotions toward their child. The result is a spiraling deterioration of any relationship between parent and child. When parents over identify with their child, they often experience guilt over their troubled child’s problems. They feel responsible for solving their child’s problems and fear that his problems will eventually consume them. Parents begin to believe that investing more time and energy will eventually prompt their child to take responsibility to change for the better. These are all false and irrational beliefs.

How can a parent rectify his necessity to enable? First and foremost, a parent will have to come to the realization that he has an enabling problem, admit that he lacks the wherewithal to change his child, recognize his own defensive behavior, and subsequently relinquish control. A parent will need to emotionally detach himself from bearing the burden of his child’s dysfunctional behaviors and allow his child to experience the consequences of his actions. Mom can no longer save Joey from coming late to work. Joey will have to face the consequences whether he likes it or not. If Joey is exhibiting disapproving behaviors, Mom will no longer excuse them but rather direct him to seek outside professional intervention. If Dad is paying Joey’s bills when he promised to “get his act together” and didn’t, then Dad needs to give him realistic and reasonable ultimatums that he can actually follow through. By doing so, Mom or Dad don’t remove their love; just their emotional reaction to his damaging behaviors. Setting clear boundaries that parents will no longer rescue their child is essential. This will ultimately create an atmosphere of mutual respect and will set the stage for beneficial change. Above all, Mom’s new awareness will free her from the previous pain of having to consistently accommodate her child. Knowing that there are healthier alternatives that can be used will empower Mom and allow her to love her child unconditionally.

There is a very fine line between helping and enabling and it is very easy to cross this line. We live in a benevolent society eager to give and help others. Fulfilling *our* needs should not be greater than fulfilling the needs of the recipient

of our kindness and graciousness. The Rambam states that the highest form of helping is to embolden someone to employ his own resolve and resources so that he can stand on his own two feet. This precept is the antithesis of enabling. We as parents, spouses, and professionals need to differentiate between helping and enabling in order to maintain and sustain healthy relationships with our children and with each other.

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