

UFYB 85: Parenting



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With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to *Unf*ck Your Brain*, the only podcast that teaches you how to use psychology, feminism, and coaching, to rewire your brain and get what you want in life. And now here's your host, Harvard law school grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Hello my chickens. How are you guys? I'm going to say, somebody in The Clutch the other day said mon poulette. I was like, oh my god, I need to use that, so now I might alternate calling you mon poulette, which is just my chickens in French.

So I'm super excited to talk about this topic today because it's something that comes up so often for my clients and I haven't talked about it on the podcast before. Of course, I work on it in *Unfuck Your Brain* or in The Clutch and in any other kind of coaching work that I do with my clients. But before we get to that, I want to tell you all something.

So I have been doing a lot of other podcast interviews. If you follow me on social media you will see them, so that's a good reason to come follow me on social media if you don't is that you basically get to know about all these bonus podcasts I do that are free when I do a podcast on somebody else. I did an interview on someone else's podcast.

So you can follow me on Instagram at just my name, karaloewentheil, all one word, or you can search me on Facebook and find me that way. I'm the only Kara Loewentheil in the world literally. Or if you're in The Clutch, we actually have a list compiled for you. So it's been super fun. I really love getting this message out and that's where you all come in.

So if you have a podcast that you love and that podcast host interviews people, it would be amazing if you would suggest me to them. Drop them a message on social media or write them an email and suggest that they interview me. Or if you have a podcast you love, you can actually message

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me on social media with it so that we know about it because maybe we haven't pitched them yet.

So I would just love all y'all's help in spreading the word about the good news of the chickens. Not the usual good word that is spread, which is usually about Jesus. So spreading the word about thought work. If you have a podcast you like, ask the host to interview me or to request to interview me, and if you have a podcast you think I should be on, you can also message me the podcast and I will look into it because we want all the women to know about this.

I have to say, I was just - I posted on social media about this actually and in The Clutch today. But my teacher and mentor is hiring a CEO for her company right now and out of 270 applications she got, only 12 of them were women. I actually haven't done the math, but I think that's basically 5%.

And a lot of the men were totally unqualified. Now, I'm not saying the solution is everybody should apply to jobs they're totally unqualified for, but the studies actually show that women won't apply to jobs unless they think they meet 100% of the qualifications and men will apply to jobs if they think they meet like, 50% of the qualifications.

So this is just one of the reasons that I am so passionate about getting the word about thought work out there because people need to know. Women need this work. Okay, I'm going to get off my soapbox. Well, I'm just going to get on a different soapbox. I'm going to get off the podcast and hiring soapbox and onto the parenting soapbox and talk about that.

So I do a lot of work on this with my clients on parenting and I actually find that a lot of my clients who are parents and the majority of whom are mothers - identify as mothers - come to me around the time their children are starting to get kind of conscious of the outside world and culture,

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especially if they have daughters because they start to see their own negative self-talk and fears and anxieties being mirrored in their kids.

And they also start to see how powerful those social forces are that impacted them and now are starting to work on their kids, especially if they have daughters, but not entirely. Of course, patriarchy is bad for everybody and the messages that people socialized as boys get growing up are totally toxic in their own way. Well, toxic is a thought as we know, but are not necessarily any better, but they are different.

And so, the point is I think that that's kind of wake up call for a lot of my clients that they are - it's not just about them and their own thoughts and feelings, which obviously are worthwhile in and of themselves and a good reason to do this work, but that they're also such a role model for their children and that their unconscious kind of negative self-talk is rubbing off on their kids and that their kids are being impacted by all the same socialization that they were impacted by and they don't really know how to help or protect them from it.

And I actually love this as a reason for doing the work because one of my purposes is to be an example of what's possible. It's a phrase I stole from my teacher but I think it's a good one. And I think when it comes to parenting, it's like a microcosm of that. As a parent, you're such a big influence on your kids and such a strong example of what is or is not possible and what they're going to believe is or is not possible.

And that's one reason that doing the work on your own mental and emotional health is so powerful because on the one hand, you learn tools you can teach your kids explicitly. Like, I definitely have clients who teach what they're learning to their children pretty directly about thoughts and feelings and about being afraid and doing things anyway and how to think about other people hurting your feelings and all that kind of stuff.

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But I also think that the implicit example is equally important and that's that implicit example of being willing to try and learn and fail and struggle and improve and love yourself as an imperfect person, which is what you want your children to be able to do too. Most of us would never want our children to speak to themselves the way we speak to ourselves.

And most of us would never speak to our children the way we speak to ourselves, except maybe in very extreme anger or distress. But we talk to ourselves like that all the time, and even so, I think the poison mean thoughts we say to ourselves I think are usually worse than anything we would ever say to anyone else, no matter how angry or upset we were.

So it's just such a kind of confluence of important reasons to do this work and if you're in The Clutch and you're a parent, I want to make sure that you do the workbook for this episode because it's really going to just blow your mind. If you're not a member of The Clutch, you can still join the day this podcast comes out. So if you're listening to this on the Thursday it came out, which is - try to do some math - June 13th, you can still join today and you'll get the workbook. It's just unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch.

So I'm not just going to talk about parenting kind of at a general level. I want to talk about one of the biggest challenges that I see my clients struggle with when it comes to parenting. And I do encourage you, even if you're not a parent to listen to this episode too.

Even if you don't think you're ever going to become a parent because what you're going to learn will probably help illuminate some aspects of your relationships with adults and it'll certainly help you understand your relationship with your own parents or if you have nieces or nephews or how your friends might be thinking or experiencing their relationship with their children. Even for those of us who aren't parents, there's just a lot of parenting that goes on around us and we were parented one way or another, and so thinking about it is still super useful I think.

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So that's what I want to explain, and here's the kind of main problem. The main problem is understanding how to set expectations and have consequences without trying to control your children or being upset when they don't comply. Now, you could have an entire coaching business or a book about this, and this is just one podcast episode.

And I do touch on some of these concepts in non-parenting context also, but I want to focus on this particular problem of having expectations or consequences for your children without trying to control them or getting emotionally attached to how they behave because I think a lot of parents have the totally optional thought that somehow things are different thought work-wise when it comes to their kids.

That's a little bit true but it's mostly not true, and here's why. So, I want to give you a quick refresher on what I teach about boundaries because it's relevant to this topic mostly as kind of a distinction, like we're going to compare how you deal with children to how you deal with adults. So a boundary is a decision you make for yourself about what you will do in response to someone else's behavior.

It's not an ultimatum, it's not a way to control them. You don't make the boundary to try to motivate them to change their behavior. You don't make the boundary out of anger or frustration because you want them to change your feelings. You make a boundary out of love for yourself and for them. A boundary might be verbalized or silent, it has nothing to do with communicating anything to the other person.

This is a concept that a lot of people find challenging even when applied to adults because we're so used to thinking of boundaries as something other people are supposed to respect or abide by, and we try to enforce them to manage other people's behavior as a roundabout way of trying to change our own thoughts and feelings.

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And it becomes even more challenging for your brain when you try to apply this idea to children. And that's not because truly everything is different with children, but it's because most parents have the thought that even if they're not supposed to try to control other adults, they are supposed to try to control their children.

So here's the good and bad news. It's not true that you're supposed to control your children or their behavior. That's an optional thought. And even if you choose to think the thought on purpose, that you should be able to control them, it's not going to change the reality, which is that you cannot control them.

Even though your children live in your house and depend on you, you cannot control their behavior, and believing that you can control it causes so much stress and suffering and self-recrimination because here's what happens; your kid does something you don't want them to do, and first you're mad at them and then you get mad at yourself because you have the thoughts that parents should be able to control their children.

So when you can't control your child, what does that mean? You make it mean that you're a bad parent and that you are not good enough. So much of the suffering I see around parenting comes from my clients making their children's behavior mean something about them as a parent or as a person.

There's also suffering that comes from making a child's behavior mean something about the child or the child's future, but even that, it usually circles back to making it mean something about the parent themselves. Because let's say you believe your kid is stubborn. So what? Why is that a problem? Only because you think that they shouldn't be, or that if they are stubborn and bad consequences happen, it'll be your fault as a parent for failing to make them not stubborn.

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If you start paying attention to your thoughts and feelings around your children's behavior, you will see that it mirrors your self-critical thoughts about every other area of your life. Not a unique situation. If you tend to worry about what other people think of you in your own life, you are going to find that you worry about what other people think of your kids and what they think about you because of your kids.

If you tend to make anything that goes wrong mean you did a bad job, you're going to find you make anything your kids do mean that you did a bad job as a parent. Whatever your thought patterns are about yourself, they're going to show up on your children. They're just a green screen for your projection. And so you're going to be creating this same kind of suffering there as in the rest of your life.

So here's the difference between how you deal with a child and how you deal with an adult. So I just reviewed how boundaries work for an adult and it is true that like an adult, you cannot actually control your children's behavior, but there is a difference in how you want to relate to them and so that is the difference between a boundary with an adult and an expectation and a consequence with a child.

So when it comes to your children, you are the person who is going to be teaching by example and you're the one who has to make a lot of the decisions about their lives that you don't make for adults. Your children, especially when they're young cannot take care of themselves, and part of your job as a parent is to raise them to try to teach them and be an example of whatever your values are, whatever you want to kind of embody for them.

But that's very different from controlling them or being able to guarantee any particular outcome. You can't control when a baby cries, you can't control when a toddler makes a mess. You can't control when a teenager

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has sex. You can't control when an adult child gets a job. But your brain tries to tell you that you can.

What you can do are set expectations and consequences, and those may look different at different ages. So for a younger child, that could mean the expectation is that they dress themselves in the morning, and if they don't, there might be consequences. Whether that's losing your privilege or whatever else you decide.

The two keys are actually quite similar to the keys when dealing with employees in a business or you know, in any job, you need to have reasonable expectations like a two-year old probably can't load the dishwasher the way you want them to, and you communicate with them in a way the child can understand. You don't just assume that your child knows exactly what they're supposed to do, and you are willing to carry out the consequence without any emotional drama.

I should say really there's three keys because your expectations, you want to know what your reason is for them and like it. Do you like your reason for an expectation about your child's behavior being, "I want you to behave a certain way so that Mary and the PTA has certain thoughts about what a good parent I am?" You might not like that reason so much.

So you've come up with your expectations in a kind of conscious, considered way. You know your reasons for them and you like those reasons. You've communicated them in a way the child can understand, which obviously is going to vary at different developmental ages. And you are willing to carry out the consequence without any emotional drama.

And this is where parents really struggle and it's the way in which dealing with kids is actually similar to dealing with boundaries for an adult in this sense. In the sense that you are not going to be effective for yourself unless you are able to carry out a consequence without emotional drama.

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You notice when I talked about boundaries, I said a boundary is not meant to control the other person's behavior. With children and an expectation and a consequence, it is a little bit more suggesting something for their behavior. You still can't control them, but it is more aimed at producing a certain behavior.

Like with a boundary with an adult, you may not even ever tell them about the boundary because it's not about getting them to change. With a child that is young and often living with you that you are still kind of in charge of things like feeding them and dressing them and getting them to school, whatever it is, you are sort of making more of an effort to produce a certain kind of behavior.

But what is the same is that you having emotional drama, you believing that if the child doesn't do what you told them to do, it causes your negative feelings and you have to be upset, that's exactly the same between a boundary with an adult and an expectation and consequence with a child.

People do this with boundaries with adults all the time too. They make a boundary and they're not really willing to carry it out and if they are going to carry it out, then they have a lot of emotional drama about it, then they don't feel any better of course. The boundary didn't do anything. They weren't really willing to do it and they didn't make it from a calm place.

So, similarly with a child, you can have expectations and consequences for a child, but your child does not cause your feelings, whether they do the thing you want them to do or not. The difference is really there are many more activities or many more areas of life where it's appropriate to have expectations for a child than it is for another adult.

Notice I said while a child. Once your child is an adult, they're an adult. So now if you're supporting them financially, for instance if your adult child is living at home, it may make sense to have expectations or consequences

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all the same because they're living with you or you're supporting them. But otherwise, it is not your business or your job to try to manage their behaviors or thoughts or feelings or goals or life.

And even if they are an adult child living with you, same as if they were a younger child. Expectation and consequence. Not do this or I have drama. Not making the child's behavior mean something about you. Not setting - giving them ultimatums that you aren't willing to enforce. All of that same drama that people do around boundaries with adults, they do around consequences and expectations with their children at every age.

So, the similarity is that you cannot control if the person does what you want to do, and it's your job to manage your mind if they don't. Just because someone is your child doesn't mean they control your feelings, they should do what you want, or any other thought that would count as not managing your mind with an adult.

So another way to think about it is that it is always your job to manage your job. It is never your job to be able to control other people. When someone is a child, it is more your job to make suggestions for how you think you want them to behave and since you have power over their whole lives, it's part of your job to raise them, it may be more appropriate to have consequences, positive or negative for certain behaviors.

But all of that is just the math. That's like, if you clean your room, then you get a half hour of screen time or whatever it is. Knowing full well your child may not clean their room, and then they may be very upset they don't get screen time, and that's okay. You can have that expectation, have that consequence, and have no emotional drama about carrying it out.

That's the way in which it is the same as a boundary. You can have a boundary that's about you and protecting yourself, your own emotional and physical space, and no drama about carrying it out. And really the

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difference is that when it comes to other adults, a boundary is really not about changing the other person's behavior. And when it comes to children, you are trying to set up an incentive or disincentive system because you're in charge of them when they're young.

But that never means that you have to have emotional drama about it, that you have to be upset, that you have to take their behavior personally, that you have to make it mean something about you. And it doesn't mean anything has gone wrong when your child doesn't follow the expectation. It's like you have to make the expectation knowing that your child very well may not follow it.

You may have a child who always follows it, and you may have a child who never follows them, and then you have to carry through those consequences without drama. One of the kind of most ironic or sort of funny - I mean this affectionately, but funniest thing I find in coaching parents is that the parent will be completely not managing their mind about the child and they'll be very upset that the child isn't managing their mind about school or their sneakers or whatever.

You can't expect a child to manage its mind and do what it said it would do and stick to agreements when as an adult and as a parent, you yourself often procrastinate or ignore agreements you've made with yourself or try to get out of agreements you made with other people, or don't do things you told yourself you'd do. You can't expect a child to manage their mind better than you do.

But the good news is that if you stop taking a child's behavior personally and stop believing you should be able to control them, you will actually have more compassion for you and for them, and you will see so much more clearly that just like you, children just have little thought, feeling, action cycles going on in their little brains, and they have even less control over their brains than you have over yours.

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So that's the sweetness for the rest of this podcast. You can't control your children no matter how hard you try, and believing that you should creates so much suffering. And making their behavior mean something about them or their future or you also creates so much suffering.

So yes, there is a difference between dealing with your own children - I'm not saying you should try to parent other people's children - with your own children, there are a lot of behaviors where you may want to set up having expectations and consequences, assuming that you know and like your reasons. You've really thought about them. It's not just well, this is what you should do and this is what my parents did and this is what the mom down the street does and I want these people to think we're good parents and whatever else.

You've really chosen those expectations and consequences consciously. And you are willing to carry them out with no emotional drama. So that is the difference. It is not appropriate to have expectations and consequences for your partner or your mom or your best friend or your boss or your employee. Well, your employee actually yes, but it is not appropriate to have expectations and consequences for other adults' behavior.

Adults get to do what they want. When it comes to your own children, yes, you can have expectations and consequences but that is not the same as trying to control them, believing you should be able to control them. Basically, someone being your child is not an excuse to not manage your mind about their behavior.

And there is such juicy thought work to do here because whatever we are making our children's behavior mean is really about us and our own thoughts about ourselves and our desire to control ourselves and control our image and control what other people think about us. All of that is such fruitful work, but you have to let go of the idea that your job as a parent is to control your child in order to get to all that juicy work that's under there.

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So that is the kind of work that we are doing in The Clutch, so if you haven't joined yet, come over. Unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. In the next few podcast episodes, I'm going to be covering loneliness, trauma, going from good to great, complaining, some other really delightful topics. Some juicy topics.

And we take them deeper every week in The Clutch where we have exclusive podcast workbooks every week and discussions where you can get help applying this stuff to your own life and so much more stuff. So come join us. Unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch and I will see you all next week. I can't remember the word for goodnight. Bonsoir mon poulette. I'll see you next week.

If you're loving what you're learning in the podcast, you have got to come check out The Clutch. The Clutch is the podcast community for all things *Unfuck Your Brain*. It's where you can get individual help applying the concepts to your own life.

It's where you can learn new coaching tools not shared on the podcast that will blow your mind even more, and it's where you can hang out and connect over all things thought work with other podcast chickens just like you and me. It's my favorite place on earth and it will change your life, I guarantee it. Come join us at www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. It's unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. I can't wait to see you there.