

Getting clear about some fundamentals

Eddie this email is a thank you – I found your website and “*Who’s in Charge?*” sessions incredibly helpful – and I know you are looking for parents to share their stories. So here is mine.

I write this at a time when my 14 year-old son, Daniel, has just returned home from an 8 week break living with my sister. We basically had the break because his behaviour at home had reached the point where his angry outbursts, verbal abuse and constant pushing the boundaries and breaking the rules had created chaos. Only part of the chaos was the result of his behaviour – the rest was caused by how we were reacting to it. By we I mean my husband – his stepfather – and I. It had reached the point where our lives were falling apart.

We had the lot: strained marriage because of constant fights over ‘the boy’ and how best to deal with him, our work suffering because of emotional exhaustion, our daughter not getting the attention she deserved, and my own anxiety and depression because somehow as a mum I hadn’t been able to ‘fix things’ and I was living in fear of the next blow up.

Doing “*Who’s in Charge?*” helped me get clear on some really fundamental things.

First of all, **I am not responsible** for my son’s abusive, angry or destructive behaviour.

Second, even if I totally empathise with his pain and problems it doesn’t excuse him being abusive and **taking it out on me or his stepdad**.

Third and most important – **giving in to his pressure tactics** and walking on eggshells to avoid a blow up ultimately **only makes his behaviour worse** - because it gives him the result he wants.

So I want to talk a bit more about each of these.

The first one was a revelation. Somehow I felt totally responsible and guilty for how my son is. From Eddie’s work I realised that in fact there were a number of factors that created the situation that led to Daniel becoming abusive. Some of them were in my control – others weren’t. Daniel’s dad is an alcoholic and had been verbally abusive towards me when he was drunk: maybe Daniel had picked up that pattern from him? Also I had overcompensated for his dad’s emotional absence by ‘spoiling’ Daniel, especially as a young child around the time of the marriage break up. And I’d given Daniel a lot of say in decisions and fed an over-inflated sense of entitlement in how I parented him. I was very democratic and also found it hard if Daniel was angry with me - and very hard to say no. This had meant his step-dad was the one who set the boundaries, which naturally created a lot of conflict between them and ‘splits’ in the family.

A big part of it all of course is Daniel and his personality. He is incredibly stubborn and determined and ‘non compliant’. That’s him. From Eddie I learnt that sure, the parenting has an impact but if we parents are the “jockeys”, not all of us are riding horses. I’ve got a Zebra.

The second realisation was around something very painful. I’d seen my son struggle with the impact of having an alcoholic dad who was emotionally unable to ‘be there’ – for example, having my son realise his dad didn’t want him to live with him and couldn’t cope

with long visits. I suppose I'd always excused my son's anger and bad behaviour as part of his coming to terms with difficult, painful stuff. I'd so empathised with his pain that I excused lots of 'inexcusable' behaviour from my son. Eddie helped me realise that I could separate the two out. I can still feel for my son and send a clear message when his behaviour is unacceptable.

Last of all, the realisation that 'giving in' makes matters worse. This one I struggle to put into practice. It means constant vigilance. I find if I give in on small things Daniel immediately starts pushing for more and going back over stuff he's previously accepted. Now it's clear rules and immediate consequences if his behaviour is unacceptable. Fair, firm – he has to learn that I'm not a 'soft pushover'. Getting back my authority as a parent is the most important thing and where most of the work is. It also allows my husband to have a better relationship with my son – he sees me setting limits and parenting and doesn't have to fill the gap.

In many ways my son seems to be responding to the changes in us. He also did a program for young blokes who have problems with anger – so he is putting in as well.

My son moved back home this week and we had a good first few days. Then yesterday he 'blew up' over something, swore at me and stormed out. I guess I had hoped we weren't going to have any more dramas like that – wishful thinking. I can't 'make' my son change but I can and am reacting differently. If nothing else, I feel better about how I'm coping and doing what we parents inevitably do – hanging in there. This time there is one important difference. I will always be there for my son and I want him to live with us but I'm no longer prepared for it to be at any price.

[Names changed]

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