

Shifting from Personalizing to Empathizing

Parent Handout

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Whether you say it out loud or not, we all have an inner dialogue. When your child does an upsetting behavior, you can fall into the trap of taking it personally. This can drive a wedge in your relationship with your children. When asked to show empathy for a child who is misbehaving, you can worry that this means that you are spoiling the child or providing too much coddling over an unacceptable behavior. What do I mean by personalizing versus empathizing?

Personalizing Language occurs when you tell yourself that your child did a negative behavior on purpose, or when you assume that the child is doing a behavior to upset others. This is language that will put distance between you and your child and will result in you feeling distressed and also struggling to like or feel compassion for your child.

Empathizing Language occurs when you look under a child's negative behavior, and you are able to see the child's need and see what is hard for that child in that situation. You remember that children do well when they can and that your child is still missing skills or still healing from a rough start such that they are struggling to show up with positive behavior. This is language that fuels connection with your child.

Empathizing with a child is NOT the same as being permissive or allowing a negative, hurtful behavior. You can empathize and STILL set limits around an unacceptable behavior. Empathizing language helps you see the attributes and skills that you need to build in your child to help them be more successful.

Even if you keep the personalizing language to yourself, it shows up in your dynamic with your child. Children can tell when a parent is struggling to like or empathize with them. It shows up in your body language, tone of voice, eagerness to interact with them, and in how quickly you bristle at a negative behavior. It can also ooze into positive interactions where you might start to assume that your child's positive behaviors are ingenuine or manipulative.

Here are some examples, along with personalizing versus empathizing inner (or outer if we are not careful) parent language.

Examples:

Child comes to dinner and immediately starts making silly noises, interrupting, and talking loudly.

Personalizing: "They try to ruin every family meal.... They have to be the center of attention...They don't care about letting anybody else have a turn to talk."

Empathizing: "They are looking for connection and don't know the right way to get it yet."
"They are having such a hard time waiting." "They don't trust that they will get the attention they need." "It's so hard for them to stay regulated when we are all together."

You ask how your child's day was when you pick them up from school. They snap at you, roll their eyes, put on music, and look out the window.

Personalizing: They are always shutting me out. Have they ever asked me about my day. They are so self-absorbed. Would it kill them to actually get off that phone and interact for a second?!

Empathizing: They must be exhausted from holding it together all day. I bet they just need some down time. It's still hard for them to reflect and put their feelings into words. They are trying to regulate right now and can't connect with words just yet.

Your child throws a fit on the plane because their ipad battery dies.

Personalizing: What is wrong with this kid? Don't they realize they are making a scene? I can't handle this right now. I won't tolerate this. Why do they have to throw a fit the moment they don't get their way? They are just trying to manipulate me so I'll give them something else to entertain them.

Empathizing: They don't know how else to regulate right now. They have no idea how to soothe or be soothed without an electronic. I have to stay regulated so I can help them regulate. This must be so overwhelming for them. I'm sure they are exhausted from this day.

Notice how the empathizing language might change how you respond. Go back through each of these examples and predict what your parent behavior might be depending on whether you used personalizing versus empathizing inner dialogue.

What empathic language could you use (either inner or outer dialogue) in each of these examples:

1. *Your child is talking over their friends in the car, speaking loudly, and telling them about how they are the top scorer in a video game that all of them like to play.*
2. *You and your teen are having a good time cooking together and listening to music. You go to hug your child. They bristle and move away and tell you your breath stinks.*
3. *Your little one is playing at a community train table. Another child takes the engine they want. Your child screams in the other child's face, pushes the other child down, and grabs the engine.*
4. *You just took your child and their friends to the mall and out for pizza. You get home, and your child says, "I hate this house. It's so boring. There's nothing to do. Why can't we have an xbox?"*
5. *Your teen is taking forever to get ready to leave. You are taking them to a community event. They finally come out to the car wearing a skin tight outfit and loads of eye make-up and what appears to be your jewelry.*
6. *Your child knows the menu by heart but gets to the front of the line and won't say what they want to order. They just stand there, and there is a long line behind you. You ask them what they want, and they keep saying "I don't know."*
7. *Your child gets sent to the office again for disrupting class during English period, and you get a call from the principal to come pick them up.*