

Ep #115: Boundaries Are Not Mean



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With Your Host

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You are listening to episode 115 of *The Autism Mom Coach*, Boundaries Are Not Mean.

Welcome to *The Autism Mom Coach* podcast. I am your host, Lisa Candra. I am a lawyer, a life coach, and most importantly, I am the full-time single mother of a teenager with Autism. In this podcast, I am going to share with you the tools and strategies you need so you can fight like hell for your child without burning out. Let's get to it.

Hello, everyone and welcome to the podcast. I am so glad you are here and I hope you are doing well. I'm just finishing up a very busy April of Autism events. I had the opportunity last month to connect with so many advocates in the Autism community. So many people who are doing such hard work to serve this community in so many different ways, from creating and running nonprofits that serve an entire region, to schools and enrichment programs specifically designed for children and young adults with Autism.

I've also had the opportunity to present to two different parent groups about burnout and self-care and that was so much fun. I've had these experiences in my own life and I hear these things all the time from my clients, but to take the show on the road, so to speak, and to be hearing more of the same feedback from more Autism moms has been really enlightening. I understand that as an Autism mom, our main goal, what drives us is that we want to be the best moms we can be for our kids. We want to give them the best life we possibly can.

We want to do everything to support them and their unrelenting needs. It's really constant, if it's not one thing, it's another. You clear one hurdle and the next one is in the horizon and that is part of our reality. What I saw in all of these parents are people who are fiercely passionate about their children, love their children to the ends of the Earth, would do anything for their children, and they're exhausted. They're tired, they're worn out, they're afraid, and they feel alone.

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So when I was presenting to them, I wanted to present to them in a way that they could hear because I know that no one's coming to one of my presentations because they want to learn about self-care. I've got to tell you, it's the last thing on my mind, it's the last thing I ever cared about. I only cared about helping my son truly. And even to this day that is my goal. I want to be able to sustain my level of advocacy so that I can do what I do for him for as long as I'm alive.

And so knowing that we don't really care about self-care, what we really care about is our children and doing the best for them and enjoying them and loving them. I wanted to talk about burnout and how that shows up in our lives and the very simple things that we can do to prevent it or to lessen it. And really in this presentation, I wanted to show these parents all the simple things that they can do, the things that don't take much time, the things that take no money at all to move the needle for both them and their child.

Because all of the things that I was recommending to them, they're for our kids. It's so we can show up as the best versions of ourselves for our kids. And also model to them how to deal with adversity, how to manage their own behaviors, how to respect other people's time and space. All of those things that are important to them in their life and as they grow. So one of the things that I talked to these parents about were boundaries. Boundaries are not mean and that was news to me, truly.

I always thought of boundaries as a consequence for someone doing something you didn't want them to do. And actually that's not a boundary at all. That's an ultimatum, an ultimatum about trying to control other people and what they do and don't do. And then giving them a pretty harsh consequence. That's not what a boundary is. A boundary is a clear and firm and respectful statement that communicates what you will or will not tolerate or what your expectations are.

Boundaries are a way of protecting our emotional and mental well-being, and they're also a way of strengthening our relationships with the people in our lives. Because those of us who don't have boundaries know this, you

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become resentful of the very people that you are doing all the things for. You're not saying no. So in all of your efforts to please them, you actually end up resenting them and this includes our children.

So I'm just going to talk a little bit more about what boundaries are. And then I'm going to talk about why they are so important for Autism moms if we want to be the best moms that we can be, if we want to show up for our children at the highest level.

So first, boundaries are about what you will do in any given situation to protect your well-being. They're not about controlling other people or their behaviors or their choices. So for example, if you yell, I will hang up the phone. If you become aggressive, I will call 911. During work hours I will not respond to text messages. So if you text me during work hours, I will not respond. Boundaries can be physical, they can be emotional. And they can be time based.

Examples would include not accepting phone calls after a certain time. Asking people not to comment on your child's weight gain on meds. Asking people not to offer you any more sleep suggestions. Those are examples of boundaries. Now, here is the thing, boundaries don't need to be communicated to other people. You don't have to go into their room and announce to your child or to the public what your boundaries are. The point about the boundary is you know what it is.

So I have a boundary, if a person were to hit me, I would call the police. I don't go around announcing that. I have a boundary that if people are smoking in or around the outside of a restaurant when it's open during the summer, I won't eat outside. I don't want to be around the smoke. They can do what they want to do. It's not about me controlling them, but it's about me deciding what I will and won't tolerate and where I will and won't go based on that.

Boundaries come with consequences that we enact such as ending a conversation or leaving a room or not answering the phone. And the key to boundaries is consistency and following through because the boundary

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doesn't exist unless we enforce it. The idea that I have a boundary and other people aren't respecting it isn't the thing. The boundary is ours and it's ours to respect by enforcing it. Boundaries are not harsh. Boundaries are not in your face, gotchas, nothing.

Boundaries are just about us honoring our own needs, our own choices, our own values. They are set out of love for us and love for the other person. So let's talk about why boundaries are particularly important for Autism moms and for our children. First, as the parents, as the caregivers to a person with Autism, it's really easy for our lives to become hijacked by Autism and our child's needs. Parenting a child with Autism is very demanding on so many levels.

And without creating boundaries, it would just be really easy or really inevitable that our kids' needs would just engulf our entire lives. And so what does that mean, their needs engulf our entire lives? There's no line between where they end and we begin. And that is a recipe for burnout, for irritability, for resentment, for diminished capacity to manage the day-to-day.

And also when we're not creating boundaries for our children, well, they don't learn to respect boundaries. They don't learn the line between them and between us. And as a result, there's a lot of enmeshment that can happen. I know this because this was me for years. I did not have boundaries when it came to Ben. From the time he was little, three years old, when he would cry, when he would be upset, he would come run over to my lap and he would pull at my hair, just very gently, almost like he was petting my hair. And I let him every single time.

I knew that I needed to let him learn how to self-soothe, but, one, I really liked the idea that I could help him because I felt very helpless at the time, very powerless to help him. So if this one thing was soothing to him, I was going to let him do it. And I was afraid of letting him cry it out. It created so much anxiety for me that I'd rather avoid it. So I let this go on longer than I would have liked. Now, I'm not trying to judge myself in hindsight and I don't want you to do that either.

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I had reasons for why I allowed that to go on and part of it is just being busy and tired. Sometimes we do take the easier way out. I also viewed letting my kid cry it out as mean on some level. It really hurt my heart to let him cry it out when I could just soothe him myself. But still, that was an opportunity for a really small boundary. If you're dysregulated, I will self-soothe with you for one minute or two minutes but then I'm going to let you have the rest of the time to work it out yourself, but that was never me for years.

I was always in the room with my son. I was always trying to work it out with him. I was always trying to comfort him. I was over-talking a lot. I never just walked out and let him have it. I never walked out and just let him have his fit, let him have his meltdown and let him get over it. And the consequence of that to me was a lot of stress, of feeling very responsible for my son's emotions. And the consequence to him is that he came to rely on me to fix his emotions.

And this backfired big time in my face as his anxiety began to peak in his tween years and he fully expected me to fix this because in the past I had found a way to soothe him, to fix it, to convince him of whatever it was so that the crying or the meltdown would stop. Boundaries are also so important for our children because they create safety. They create predictability. They create a container in which they live. And so if they know the boundaries very clearly, they might not like them but there is comfort in knowing what the boundaries are.

And I found that with my son as I began to create and enforce the boundaries over and over and over again, behaviors changed. And doing this with a 13 year old was not fun, I have to tell you. I really wish I had done it with my five, six or seven year old, I didn't. The issues were bigger and the boundaries had to be bigger.

For instance, if you hit yourself, I will walk out of the room. Now, this was when I understood that my son was hitting himself to get my attention because it horrified me and it got my attention. But when I saw that this was the purpose for which he was doing it, I had to walk away as hard as that was, I had to do that. And guess what? He stopped hitting himself.

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Similarly, another boundary that we had. If you lunge at me, try to hit me or destroy property, I will call 911. This was a really hard boundary to make and to enforce because I never wanted to call 911. I always wanted to see if I could work things out, if he would calm down. If the threat that I would, would be enough to calm him down because he certainly didn't want to go back to the hospital. And in doing that there was so much uncertainty for me and that created so much anxiety.

So when I started to enforce it, it was a pain in the ass and that you actually have to do the thing, you have to call 911. You have to go through the whole thing. But it also created predictability and safety for me in that I knew what to do. And my son also knew I wasn't playing anymore. So if he was truly that out of sorts and he truly needed intervention, he was getting it. And if that wasn't the case, this was not something to play with anymore.

And these boundaries were for both of our protection. I didn't want my son hurting himself and I didn't want him hurting me. And I'm going to be honest with you, not because I was worried about him hurting me. I was worried more about the consequences of him hurting an adult in his household. What happens if I really did get hurt and it was by him, what happens to him? I was more concerned with him and how to protect him from himself. And so that's where the boundaries came in.

But look, you may not be dealing with anything close to what I just described. But there are situations in your life where I'm betting you can create boundaries to benefit both you and yourself. I'm going to give you some more examples of my boundaries and the boundaries of my clients.

So for example, one of the boundaries that I created with my son is that when he came home from school, I was still working and so I would say, "I am going to stay in my office until 4:00pm. You can come in. You can say "Hi, how was your day?" But that's it, you have to leave and I'll talk to you afterwards." And that was a really difficult boundary to enforce because he knew I was in the next room and what if he just knocked? And what if he came in with a funny story but then he shifted it to something that he was perseverating about?

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So I had to continually redirect him and redirect myself. Here's what was happening before. I let him come in. He's talking. I'm trying to finish my work. I'm getting distracted. The work is taking longer. I'm getting frustrated with that so I'm getting frustrated with him and escalating the situation. By creating that boundary and finishing my work and being done with it I was able to give him my full attention. So I was able to stay regulated and that made such a difference in how the night went, homework went a lot faster.

Actually at this time I don't think he had homework, but just after school activities, getting ready for dinner, getting ready for bed, everything went more smoothly because of that small boundary.

Now, I want to give you an example from a client with a seven year old little boy. Every time he came home from school, he would just lose it as so many of our kids do. They are working so hard all day. Some of them are masking so hard all day and they come home and they just explode. And sometimes his explosion included throwing his toys at her, punching at her, pinching her leg. And so her boundary was to keep space from him, that when he came in, she would keep space from him so that lunging couldn't happen, and that if it did, she would walk out of the room.

And look, she didn't announce this to him ahead of time, but she would leave and she would go to the bathroom and she would just hang out in the bathroom for a few minutes and then come back. And inevitably he would self-regulate himself. This boundary kept her from freaking out at him, getting upset at him, taking his behavior personally. And it also gave him the ability to settle down and also took away his ability to put hands on her or to throw things at her because he was upset. He had to figure out another way of handling that.

Alright, so those are some examples of boundaries. I've told you why I think boundaries are important for us if we want to show up as the parents we want to be. If we want to model the type of behavior that we want our children to have, if we want to have the energy to show up each day to this very demanding role that we have as Autism moms, boundaries are critical.

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They're also important for our children because they create predictability, safety and a container for them.

They know what to expect. They know if x happens, then y happens. They might not love it. They might go apeshit over it, at least at first but it is providing a container for them. So I want you to take a look at your life, at your day with your kid and think about where a boundary would be helpful. It could be as simple as, if my daughter asked me for a drink of water. I will tell her to get the drink herself. Very simple things like that. If my child throws their iPad, then I will take it away.

You don't have to announce these to your kid, but you do have to enforce them so that they will start to see the line and understand what happens when they do certain things. And it will also create for you, more feeling of being in control. Because the one thing I hear all the time from Autism moms is, "I feel so out of control." Creating boundaries is a way for you to take back some of your control because again, boundaries are not about what our kids do. They're about what we do in response and we get to control that.

Alright, that is it for this week's episode. I hope this was helpful. If you struggle to set boundaries with your child, you probably struggle to set boundaries in all areas of your life. If you struggle to set boundaries for your child now is the time to schedule a consultation call with me. There's going to be a lot of time with us and our kids and now is the perfect time to start to learn how to create boundaries and enforce them.

If you want to have less stress this summer, I can help you with that right now in my coaching program. After just a couple of sessions you will feel like a new person. You will be showing up more powerfully in your role as an Autism mom, and that is the greatest gift that you can give to your child. If you're ready to up-level your parenting skills, go to my website theautismmomcoach.com and schedule your consultation now. Thanks everyone for listening and I will talk to you next week.

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Thanks for listening to *The Autism Mom Coach*. If you are ready to apply the principles you are learning in these episodes to your life, it is time to schedule a consultation call with me. Podcasts are great but the ahas are fleeting. Real change comes from application and implementation and this is exactly what we do in my one-on-one coaching program. To schedule your consultation, go to my website, theAutismmomcoach.com, Work With Me and take the first step to taking better care of yourself so that you can show up as the parent you want to be for your child with Autism.