

8 Ways to Create Space for Each of Your Children

By Jim Burns, Ph.D.

“I need *my space!*” How many times have you heard *that* from your kids? If they’re normal, they might say that a lot. And what they’re talking about often has very little to do with the size of their bedrooms! Each of us needs enough space around us to maneuver – that’s a given. But we also need a certain measure of *emotional* space as well, and the best place to learn how to establish it is when parents model that kind of behavior for their kids.

I like the way Hal Runkel outlines this process in his book ScreamFree Parenting. He notes 8 ways for us, as parents, to “create space” for our kids by keeping our own anxieties in check.

1. **Respect their privacy.** If your son is in his bedroom with the door closed – and you need to talk to him for whatever reason – you’ll go a long way toward “creating space” for him if you respect his privacy by knocking on the door before entering. Of course, as a parent, you have every right to just walk on in, but a simple knock and asking if “now’s a good time” to have the conversation gives your son the opportunity to feel as though he actually bought into the process – rather than having it forced upon him.
2. **Leave their messy rooms alone!** Since it is your daughter’s room, let her assume responsibility for keeping it clean. Her bedroom is really the only part of the house she can “own,” and a healthy dose of positive peer influence will motivate her more than a nagging mom or dad. So if you’re feeling anxious because your child’s room is a disaster area, go clean your own room instead.
3. **Respect their choices.** This is especially important in the area of money. Kids need to learn about value and stewardship, but the best way for them to do so is to actually have money in their hands. Give your child an allowance appropriate for his age, and let him spend it anyway he chooses. Then, look for the teachable moments. Better to learn value lessons when he’s younger than to have a 27-year-old with no concept of money still “borrowing 20 bucks” from Mom and Dad later in life!
4. **Give up your need to know how your child is feeling.** This is a tough one for the modern, “involved” parent – but it’s a big one. For some reason, we parents have been taught that we can be a huge asset to our children by helping them sort out their feelings. Well, guess what? There’s a good chance that your 11-year-old daughter has no idea what she’s feeling. She just knows that she’s “feeling it.” Now, this doesn’t mean we should neglect our kids. But the important thing for us, as parents, is to just “be there” for our children. They’ll open up a lot more to us as soon as we give up our need to know and simply start being available to listen.
5. **Give up your need to know “why.”** Here’s the situation: your three-year-old son just “drew Mommy a pretty picture” in black felt marker on the living room wall. Mom is

presented with this “masterpiece” and shrieks, “Billy! What were you THINKING?” Like a 3-year-old will strum his fingers across his chin and muse, “Sure the black marker will permanently stain the white wall, but it’s worth it because it’s a measure of how deep my love runs for my Mommy.” I don’t think so! When we ask our kids for “a reason,” we often put them on the defensive. So don’t go there. Deal with the circumstances as they are, and then move on.

6. **Create space for your children by letting them struggle every now and then.** Kids need to learn how to do things for themselves, and oftentimes, very well-meaning parents rob their children of some golden opportunities to learn simply because they rush to answer a child’s question too soon, or to meet a need the child is fully capable of meeting on his own. Do you get anxious when you see one of your kids struggling to complete a task? Why should you be uncomfortable? His success or failure isn’t a reflection on you personally. As children move from dependence on parents to independence, this kind of “space” grows in importance, so make sure your children get it from you, their parents.
7. **Allow your kids to disagree with you – and learn to respect their arguments.** It’s amazing how much space you can create for your kids by asking a question like, “This is what I think about it. What do *you* think?” You’ve just shown your daughter that you respect and value her as an individual, not merely a “more perfect reflection of you.” Anxious parents have a hard time with this because they fear a loss of control if the child’s opinion is different from theirs. Instead the reality is, you can stay calm and in control with your kids even when there’s a difference of opinion, but only if you’ve established a foundation where your kids know their opinions count and that you’ll at least listen to their argument when they disagree with you.
8. **Utilize “indirect connection” with your kids from time to time.** For example, when you’re having a “serious” conversation with one of your kids, do you make it a point to look him in the eye? Well, try not doing so every now and then. If the goal is to create space for your kids, try having a “serious” conversation while you’re doing something fun like shooting hoops, going for a walk or even working on a jigsaw puzzle. You’ll be amazed at how much more attentive your child will become and also how empowered they’ll be because you’ve begun initiating more of a “coaching” style of parenting – the kind of instruction that signals the shift from “overall authority” to “friend and mentor” relationship between a parent and child.

So you see, you *don’t* have to move to a different state or buy a bigger house to give your kids the “emotional space” they need. Just be intentional and involved and let “The Power of Being There” help you teach your kids a valuable lesson about value and respect in regards to their “personal space.”

(Excerpted from the book, ScreamFree Parenting: Raising Your Kids by Keeping Your Cool by Hal Edward Runkel)