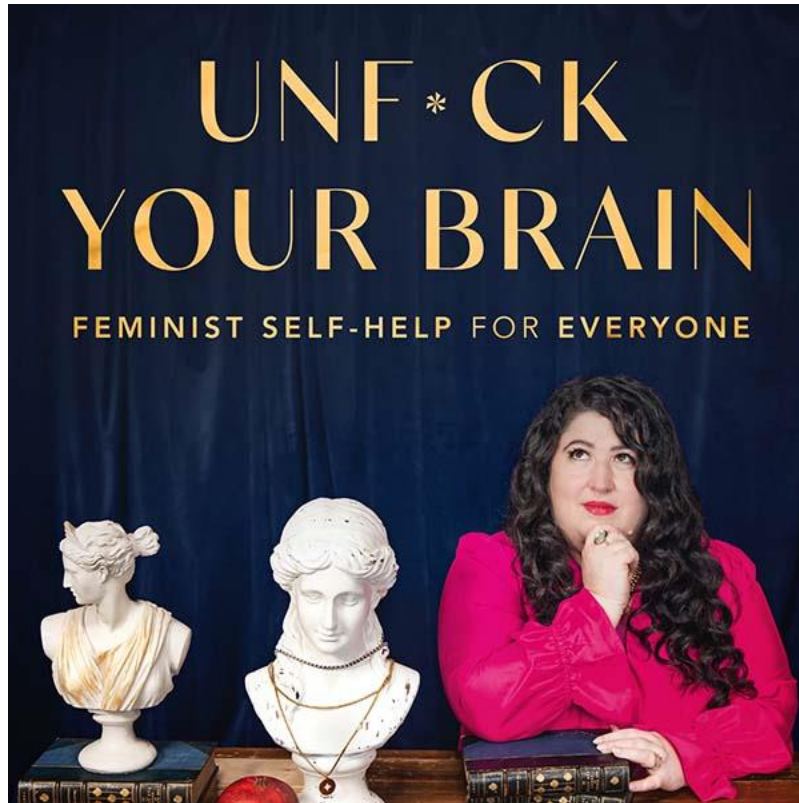


UFYB 355: The Role of Urges in Parenting & Being Parented



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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When you're a parent of young kids, you spend a lot of time explaining to them how to do, well, everything. As they get older, it's natural for that dynamic to change. But if we know one thing about how brains work, it's that they don't change magically just because a circumstance changes. I believe the brain habits we develop when parenting small children is one source of conflict with, or alienation from our children as they get older.

And in this episode, I'm going to explain the phenomenon and teach you how to start changing it. This is going to be really important whether you are a parent or whether you had parents or caregivers, so pretty much for all of us to understand. So, let's get into it.

Welcome to *UnF*ck Your Brain*. I'm your host, Kara Loewentheil, Master Certified Coach and Founder of the *School of New Feminist Thought*. I'm here to help you turn down your anxiety, turn up your confidence and create a life on your own terms, one that you're truly excited to live. Let's go.

Hello, my friends, how are you all? I am recording this on a Monday and that means I spent the weekend with my step-kids. And one of the most hilarious things about parenting I find is all the things you end up saying out loud that you never thought you would have to say, like, "Don't spit on the plants, that's not how we water them." Or, "No, you can't use the wine glasses as a xylophone."

Anyone who has spent time parenting or caregiving for a small child knows that you spend a lot of time giving verbal correction or instruction. You are constantly having to tell your children to wash their hands, to stop licking that fire hydrant, to stop pinching their sibling. They need your help with the most basic things, how to pour water into a cup, how to wash their hands, how to make a sandwich. And not only that, but your kids ask for your

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opinion and your wisdom all the time when they're little, they believe you know everything and they ask you all kinds of questions.

Why is the sky blue? How many penguins are there in the world? How does electricity work? They will ask you anything because they assume that you know. And we know that your brain learns certain ways of thinking through habit, sometimes that's on purpose, if you are in the Feminist Self-Help Society and you work with me and you're choosing your thoughts on purpose and deciding what to think intentionally. Well, most of the time, if you're not doing thought work on purpose, your brain is just creating its models of the world based on what is happening right now.

Your brain is a predictive machine, its whole job is to try to predict the future, based on the past. That's why our past can become such a limit on our belief and our future, because our brain only uses that as a guide instead of imagining a different way. So, whatever you experience, your brain uses that to predict what the future will be like and how you should show up moment to moment in the present.

So, when you're parenting a small child and day in and day out, you need to tell them what to do and how things work 24/7, what your brain learns is that you are the authority and your child needs your guidance. And the problem is that parenting is by nature an experience that is always changing because your brain is always growing and maturing and yet your brain is always operating based on the past.

And your neural networks around parenting are the strongest from the time that they got the most reinforcement, which is when your children are little. And you did have to be interacting with them almost all the time and helping them do almost everything. Just to give you one really small example that I noticed when I started thinking about this. When I would be at a family event, I used to always roll my eyes because one of my parents

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would always say to me, “Have you said hello to your grandmother?” And before I parented, I thought, yeah, I’m 35 years old, I know how to say hello to my grandmother.

But once I began parenting myself, I realized that probably my parents had said that line to me 500 times when I was growing up. and I did not know to say hello to my grandmother. And the neural network was now just activated by seeing me and my grandmother in the same room. It wasn’t a conscious or intentional evaluation of my true likelihood of actually having said hello to my grandma. It is not as though my parents thought to themselves, you know who doesn’t know how to say hello to her grandmother, Kara, we should remind her. It was just an automatic response from a strong neural network.

Your neural networks for how you relate to your kid start forming during the time when you need to constantly instruct them, when they need your guidance to stay alive on a moment to moment basis. When you do really know what’s best for them, most of the time, because those things are mostly about survival, not about their specific idiosyncratic adult hopes and dreams. And so, you build the habit of voicing those beliefs constantly. It’s literally your job to do so, to teach your kids how to operate in the world.

And then your kids start growing up, but your brain is not catching up as fast. So, your kids are getting more independent. They don’t want or need your opinion as much, but your brain still thinks that telling them what to do and who to be and how to operate is not just your role, but is essential for their survival. And you will have a strong urge to do what your brain thinks is essential for their survival. Unfortunately, as your kids get older, especially once they’re actually adults, that can lead to conflict and alienation because your brain doesn’t see your kids as full autonomous adults.

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Your brain has years and years of experience of voicing your opinion and acting as an authority in your kids' lives, that's what kept them alive and helped them grow into the people they are now. And you may even have insider wisdom that is correct sometimes, even though obviously correct is subjective. But it doesn't really matter because think about how you feel as an adult when another adult tries to tell you what to do or who to be. Does that create connection or alienation?

So, you have this mismatch where your brain experiences connection when telling your adult child your opinion about their life or what they should do or who they should be. But your adult child may feel alienation or disconnection because they haven't asked for your input and/or their experience, and their belief is that this is based on your beliefs and not on who they actually are.

Because of the way the brain works, it can really feel like you do know what your kids should do or who they are better than they do. But that's not because it's true, it's because it's a brain habit. So, when I was on my book tour, I did the Chicago event with my mom. So, a lot of the questions were about parenting. And a mom who was there with her daughter raised her hand and said that she found it really hard not to share her opinion with her daughter about her daughter's choices or her lifestyle. And so, I'm going to share with you what I told her in just a moment.

So, when I was in Chicago getting this question from this mom about how hard it was not to share her opinion with her daughter. She said that it felt like this really strong desire to do it, that it was hard to resist doing it because it almost felt like this urge. And that to her, the strength of that urge to comment meant that it must be an important thing to say. That if she felt really strongly about sharing her opinion, it must mean that her opinion was true or useful or valid or important.

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But what I offered her and what I want to offer you all, is that the strength of that urge to speak really has no relation to the value of the comment you want to make. It's simply a reflection of the strength of the brain habit you have, of evaluating what your kids are doing and telling them what to do differently. Your brain is habituated to telling your kids what to do in matters big and small. Your brain is really used to the pattern of observing your child and then offering correction, instruction or opinion.

And that urge feels really strong because for years and years that was a daily occurrence, and not just once a day, but 10,000 times a day probably for 10 years and then maybe it went down to 3,000 times a day for the next eight years or so until they left home. That is so much brain training. If that was practicing the cello, you would be playing at Carnegie Hall.

So, the first takeaway here is that if you are a parent of older kids, don't mistake the strength of the urge to comment or intervene or offer your opinion as being a signal of the importance or value of your contribution. Your brain has been trained to think this is what it should do. That doesn't mean it's still the right way to approach or interact with your kid. You get to decide that for yourself, but I recommend you make that decision with a different metric than I really think I'm right, or it feels really important to say this.

Something more like what are your values in parenting and does offering this comment align with them? What kind of relationship do you want to have with your kids and will this comment further build that relationship or harm it? I think those are better questions to ask yourself.

If you are a parent and you want to try to change this behavior, my advice is that you practice allowing the urge to come up without reacting to it, the same way we work on any urge in any area of our lives. You don't need to repress or resist it. It doesn't mean that you're meddling or a bad parent or

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anything like that, it's just an urge. Judging it or resisting it will only make it stronger. Instead, I recommend you get curious, get to know what it feels like in your body when you have the urge to comment or opine.

How does it feel afterwards when you do it? What is it like if you don't do it and you allow the urge to be there without acting on it? What returns do you get from these different actions? Now, some of you may be black and white thinkers and if that's you, no, I am not saying, so you should never ever say anything to your kids, even if you have wisdom or life experience to offer. I am not saying that.

I am suggesting that, as in most things in life, making decisions about when to offer are unsolicited thoughts or opinions, is better guided by our values in relationship, or by the outcome we want to create within ourselves and the feeling in the relationship we want to have, rather than by the feeling of urgency or the desire to change another how person thinks, feels or acts. That's honestly part of parenting little kids too, because they're not totally controllable but it's everything when it comes to parenting older ones.

And if you are a person who struggles with your own parents telling you what to do or sharing their unsolicited opinions, or judging your lifestyle or your choices. Just remember this is not necessarily a verdict on what they think about you as a person or your capabilities or potential. They are not necessarily thinking that you don't know what you're doing in your life or that you're making mistakes or that you need them to tell you what to do. It's at least in part, probably just an unconscious habit their brain has of observing you and then offering their opinion or intervention.

They have built that over many years when it was necessary. And unless they listen to this podcast, they are not aware of the power of that habit in their brain and even if they do listen, they just learned about it now. So, you can choose what to think when this happens, informed by this episode.

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Choosing what we're going to think, feel and do on purpose is what we're all about here, whether you are a parent, a child, or both. Have a beautiful week, my friends, you and your urges too.

If you're loving what you're learning on the podcast, you have got to come check out the Feminist Self Help Society. It's our newly revamped community and classroom where you get individual help to better apply these concepts to your life, along with a library of next level blow your mind, coaching tools and concepts that I just can't fit in a podcast episode.

It's also where you can hang out, get coached, and nerd out about all things thought work and feminist mindset with other podcast listeners 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/society. I can't wait to see you there.