

“No Limits” by Dennis Granzen

“Desire creates the power.” - Raymond Hollingwell

In the new video “Caleb’s Story,” Pat Kelly talks about the necessity of getting comfortable with asking people to do things they may not be used to doing. Yet for many of us, more difficult than achieving something is asking for the help to do it. In fact, asking can be the obstacle that puts many great ideas, plans and potential accomplishments on a sort of never ending hold. While some people have no trouble asking for what they need or want, others of us are just uncomfortable with that sort of asking—especially when asking for ourselves rather than someone else. What is it about asking that can take us so far out of our comfort zone, and lead to a sort of paralysis? The answer varies with the situation and the people involved.

Certainly, it’s easier to ask something of someone if that person has a responsibility to respond. Teachers, health care and human service workers have a defined role binding them to the people and families they serve, and a responsibility to follow through on requests made to them. While inequities in the power of these relationships can make asking difficult, especially when the request causes the person to do something outside what they consider the normal way of doing things, we at least can say that these people must respond.

In other situations, when the people we’re requesting something of are not duty bound to respond, we may be concerned that the act of asking in itself could damage the relationship. We may fear we’re placing too great a burden on a friend or acquaintance, or at least of being perceived as doing so.

The nature of the request itself may hinder us from being comfortable asking for help. We may fear a negative response to a sensitive area. This is often the case when asking about friendship issues regarding our children who struggle in this area. Asking another parent to get the children together can feel like a pretty high stakes proposition. An answer of “no” can be devastating, and even a non-committal response or a failure to follow up can be hurtful. Sometimes the “what if” in our own minds keeps us from asking.

What, then, can we do?

First off – as many of you have heard me remind you over the years – never forget that at the same time you’re asking for something, you’re also offering something as well. You’re offering something of great value, namely your precious children. No matter the extent of their need for support, they also offer their own unique and valuable gifts, and the people around them need only be open to receive them in order to benefit.

Each of us also must be aware of our own style and comfort level in asking. If you’re the type who isn’t intimidated by asking others for their support regardless of who they are or what the situation is, go for it. Ask with respect and confidence. You may not get the response you want but you probably won’t be any worse off than when you started. As the poet Carl Sandburg wrote, “This old anvil has seen many broken hammers.”

If you're less comfortable asking people directly, you may need to find someone who can do it for you. Do you have a friend or relative who is comfortable asking for you? Can you find someone to champion your cause? If you can, you need only ask that one person. If you find it hard to discover this one person, you may want to address your concerns to a more intimate group. This is the time to start either a formal or informal Circle of Support, a great mechanism for sharing the difficulty of asking for things.

Finally, think about how you ask. While there are times to lay things out and make a direct request, there are other times when you can be less direct. At these times, try to steer clear of putting someone in "yes or no" mode. Ask your question in a way that allows a response of "yes", but doesn't require one of "no". For example, rather than say, "Can your child get together and play with mine?" you can say, "I'm looking for a play partner for my child, can you think of anyone I might ask?" This allows the other parent to offer to get the children together, but also allows for her or him to come up with ideas, offer to find others for you, or gracefully bow out. Without the rejecting "no", you can keep connected and not damage the relationship. While this may seem manipulative to some, I see it more as respectful and accommodating.

As difficult as asking can be for some of us, in telling us Caleb's story Pat Kelly reminds us how important it is. Asking is also something that can get easier with practice. We also need to be brave for our children, and remember that bravery comes with fear. As Ambrose Redmoon wrote, "Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear."

(Note: For information on ordering a copy of "Caleb's Story," contact the Waisman Center at the University of Wisconsin – Madison or go to www.waisman.wisc.edu/wrc/pub.html.)

*Family Footnotes
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