

THE LET THEM THEORY COMPANION GUIDE

PARENTING

WITH

**LET
THEM**

Mel Robbins

and

Dr. Stuart Ablon

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Thank you

Thank you for downloading this guide to using The Let Them Theory with children.

I wanted to create this for you, because in researching this book, I saw an overwhelming number of questions from people wanting to know whether or not The Let Them Theory is applicable to kids. You asked:

Mel, am I supposed to just say Let Them when my kids are doing something wrong, stupid, or potentially harmful to themselves and others?

No, you are not.

I want to be very clear about that.

You can't just say "let them" all day as your kids are smearing chocolate sauce and coffee grinds all over the kitchen floor, or scrolling through social media all day, or vaping up in their room, or using your money to pay for a lifestyle they can't afford.

That is not what I am talking about here.

When you use The Let Them Theory the right way with your kids, it will help you be more effective as a parent, and it will create a deeper connection between you and your child.

This is so important that I wanted to get it right, so I reached out to Dr. Stuart Ablon to help me create this short guide to using The Let Them Theory as a parent, coach, caregiver, teacher, or grandparent.

Dr. Stuart Ablon is a father of three and an award-winning psychologist who runs the Think:Kids program at Massachusetts General Hospital. He's also a professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and a leading expert on behavior change. He is the author of four books and imparts a revolutionary, yet practical, approach to better understanding and resolving challenging behavior while building the skills needed to protect mental health.

You can trust his insights because they are based on his thirty years of research and clinical experience.

Below, you'll find his recommendations on when to "Let Them" and when you need to step in and take control.

You already know that The Let Them Theory has two critical steps:

Step 1: Saying "Let Them" and releasing control.

Step 2: Saying "Let Me" and taking control back by focusing on your response to the situation or to your child's emotions or behavior.

Dr. Ablon takes it one step further in this resource.

I don't know about you, but when I get frustrated, worried, or scared about my kids, I've always tried to "make them" do what I wanted them to do.

Using The Let Them Theory, Dr. Ablon is teaching you and me a different approach: "working with them."

This one switch has been life-altering with my relationships with my kids and my effectiveness as a parent.

So I wanted to say a big thank you to Dr. Ablon for taking the time to write this guide for you.

—Mel



Dr. Stuart Ablon, Ph.D., is Founder and Director of Think:Kids in the Department of Psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital. An award-winning psychologist, Dr. Ablon is an Associate Professor and the Thomas G. Stemberg Endowed Chair in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. He also co-founded the Center for Collaborative Problem Solving where he also served as Co-Director from its inception until 2008. Dr. Ablon is author of four books and numerous articles, chapters and scientific papers, and imparts a revolutionary, yet practical, approach to better understanding and resolving challenging behavior while building the skills needed to protect mental health. He received his doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of California at Berkeley and completed his training at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School. One of the world's top-rated thought-leaders and speakers, Dr. Ablon teaches educators, parents, clinicians, managers, and leaders a very different approach to understanding and addressing challenging behavior of all types and in all people.

Introduction

First off, I want to thank Mel for asking me to help with the Let Them Parenting Guide.

When you combine her Let Them Theory with the work I've been doing for the last 30 years, you have an incredibly powerful recipe for dramatically improving your relationships with your kids and helping them build the skills they need to live happy, fulfilling, and independent lives.

But it starts with us. Not our kids. Because even the best parenting approaches are only useful if we can think straight enough to use them!

I know you've been there – whether your kids are worrying you to death, or just frustrating you because they won't help with dishes, or they seem unmotivated in school.

Our kids can bring out the best and worst in us.

If you've never heard the term dysregulation, it means losing control of our emotions.

For our kids, that might look like anything from pouting to shouting or just plain refusing.

And here is the thing about dysregulation: it's contagious. There is nothing like our kids losing control of their emotions to cause us to lose control of our emotions too.

When your kid doesn't do what you want them to do, or they do things you don't want them to do, it will push your buttons, and you will probably have trouble controlling your own emotions.

Thankfully, there's a better way to parent, and it starts with learning how to manage your own emotions. Once you can do that, you can learn an approach based in neuroscience that has been shown to work even in the toughest of situations.

Mel's Let Them Theory provides a powerful way for us as parents to manage our own emotional responses to our kids' behavior so we can stay calm enough to respond with the smart part of our brain and use the kind of strategies I teach.

And it helps us avoid power struggles we don't need to take on.

When we start to lose our cool and try to make our kids do something, we almost always create a power struggle. Based on my 30 years of research and clinical work, I can say it doesn't have to be that way.

All of my work flows from a simple philosophy: kids do well if they can.

Not kids do well if they *want* to – but kids do well if they can.

I want to start with that science-backed philosophy because it makes you, as the parent, understand that if your child is exhibiting challenging behavior, or if there is a constant power struggle where you're trying to make them do things, that the solution is not more pressure.

In fact, it's the opposite. It's more acceptance, more listening, more understanding, more flexibility, and it's focusing on managing your emotions so that you can respond differently.

I want you to know your child wants to do well, they want to be happy, they want to succeed, and they want you to be proud of them.

So, let's start with that statement as the truth: kids do well if they can.

And let's also remember that philosophy applies to you too.

Parents do well if they can also! We are all trying the best we can with the skills we have to do the best job raising our kids.

But we want to give you a few more tools to help you do better.

You can use The Let Them Theory to drop the power struggles and stay calm and in control of your responses to your kids' behavior. And you can take a new approach to work **WITH** your kids, instead of constantly feeling like you're working against them.

Step #1: Let Them

The Let Them Framework is great for managing your emotions and responses as a parent.

Let Them provides a framework to support your kids' development and foster autonomy in an age when helicopter parenting is all too common.

We all want our kids to be happy and thrive, but ironically the more invested we are in steering them to places we think they should go, the less motivated they often become.

That's because internal motivation is driven by a sense of autonomy or independence, not by feeling controlled.

Let Them is rooted in helping us relinquish the desire for control that we never really had in the first place. It has the capacity to help us get out of our kids' way so they can carve their own path forward.

When should you use it? Probably 90% of the time.

When the stakes are low, the benefits of Let Them are huge. So, for example, Let Them:

- Choose their own clothes to wear
- Decide whether they are hungry or not
- Pick their own friends
- Decide whether to play soccer or dance
- Choose their own courses at school
- Decide the best time to do their homework

Just to be clear: Let Them doesn't mean you can't offer an opinion, and their solutions need to be within reason. Letting your child choose between 8:30 and 9:00 PM bedtime is one thing. Midnight is another!

And as Mel said, we obviously can't just let our kids do whatever they want. This is especially true with anything dangerous, self-destructive, or self-indulgent.

We should *not* Let Them:

- Stay up all night before school
- Only eat sweets
- Blow off classes routinely
- Abuse alcohol or substances
- Engage in risky sex

When we are really worried about something and the stakes are high (like any kind of dangerous behavior), we can't Let Them. Instead, we need to step in and take control. We usually think we can do that by trying to Make Them.

But unfortunately, even when the stakes are high and especially as kids get older, we mostly can't control their behavior. We can't Make Them even if we want to. And when we try to take back control that way, it often makes things spiral even more out of our control.

This is where the Let Me part of the theory comes in.

Step #2: Let Me

The “Let Me” part of the theory applied to parenting is not Let Me Make Them! It’s Let Me Work with Them.

When we get upset and try to force our kids to do what we want them to do, it not only doesn’t work most of the time, but it also usually makes things worse.

Even when we think Make Them has worked, it usually doesn’t solve the problem for very long. That problem will be back before you know it.

And taking the Make Them approach doesn’t help our kids build the skills they need to manage tricky situations better and more independently in the future.

Thankfully, in situations like this, the alternative to Let Them doesn’t have to be Make Them.

There is a third option in our control to choose: Let Me Work with Them.

Work with Them is when you make the decision that your response will be to collaborate with them, to allow you to express and pursue your concerns while also making sure their perspectives, concerns, and ideas are on the table too.

Working with Them can also be used when Let Them isn’t working.

If you Let Them and it doesn’t go well, you give them the opportunity to learn from their mistakes. But if they don’t learn from their mistakes or they keep repeating the same mistakes, they probably need your help building some skills to handle those situations better.

That’s where that third option comes in and you decide to Let Me Work with Them.

I want to show you an example of this.

The process that I describe below can be used for just about any problem you have with your kid at any age.

For example: Your kid isn’t getting up and dressed in the morning to go to school.

You could try to impose your will and Make Them do what you want to do.

Or you could make the decision to say to yourself: Let Me Work with Them.

Start with a neutral observation to kick the conversation off:

“Hey, I’ve noticed that in the mornings, getting dressed and out of bed and downstairs in time for school – there’s something about it that hasn’t been working great.”

And notice my language. As a clinician, we have this little trick we call “externalizing the problem.” Make the problem the problem: getting dressed in the morning. Not the kid.

And then you can say: *“What do you think’s going on?”*

Now, if this is a young kid, they might say, *“I don’t know.”*

That’s information. So, what do you do?

Let them know you heard them and use reassurance that you are not trying to Make Them:

“OK. You don’t know. That’s OK. You’re not in trouble. I bet we can figure this out together.”

Then go back to trying to gather information to better understand what’s going on for them.

“What I’ve noticed is when I come to get you up and then I get your brother up and come back later, you’re still sitting there and you haven’t gotten ready. Don’t worry, you’re not in trouble, but I’m sure there’s a good reason. How come? What do you think is the reason why you’re not getting dressed?”

Really listen to their response and let them know you’ve heard them. You can do this by repeating what you’ve heard in your own words.

What if they really don’t know or don’t respond at all? You can take some educated guesses about what you think is going on. But remember: kids do well if they can! Don’t blame or judge. Be curious, open-minded, and just try to understand.

Using a real-life example, let’s say they tell you they don’t like being alone upstairs and

the last one to get downstairs because they are slower than their brother.

Once you've summarized what you heard from them, then you can tell them why this is an issue for you: *"As your mom, (or your dad), I'm just worried that we need to get out the door on time for school and work."*

Remember this isn't Make Them so just share your concern, not what you think the solution should be!

Once you've heard them and shared what you are worried about, then invite them to problem-solve and give them the first chance to come up with a solution. Because if they are the first person to suggest an idea, it means they are already invested in it, and they are getting practice at solving problems like this.

Try using the word AND instead of BUT when you summarize the problem you are trying to solve together:

"I bet there's something we can do so you aren't the last one downstairs AND we get out the door in time. Do you have any ideas? What do you think?"

Whether your kid has a good idea or a terrible one, say: *"That's an idea. Let's test it out together."*

Test it out together with them by checking to see if it works for them, works for you, is realistic, and doable. If it isn't, you go back to the drawing board together.

What if they don't have any ideas? You can suggest one to try on for size together. The goal is any solution that works for both of you.

So, if they suggest bringing their clothes downstairs and getting dressed there, and that works for both of you, you've got your solution, and there's already ownership there! Who wins in that case? Both of you. Who loses? No one. Problem solved, skills practiced, and helping relationship built.

You have not lost any of your authority as a parent by choosing to Work with Them. In fact, you look like much more of an authority figure when you show them how to solve problems effectively.

Problem-solving together also doesn't rely on being bigger and stronger than your kid, which is good because otherwise, what are you going to do when they are bigger and stronger than you?

Now you may be thinking, little kids, little problems, right? Yes, but this simple, evidence-based process has been shown to solve much harder problems, build skills, and repair relationships with some of the toughest teens and adults in the toughest of settings.

Just know it's not magic and will take practice. But practice makes better! The more you use it, the easier it will get for you and your kid.

Be kind to yourself and your kid as you practice together. Remember kids do well if they can and so do we parents!

So, parents, let's ...

Let Them be who they are.

Let Them have their feelings.

Let Them have their own perspectives and ideas.

Let Them have their autonomy.

Let Them try and fail.

Let Them make decisions and learn from them.

Let Them take responsibility.

Let Them practice coming up with solutions.

Let Them hold themselves accountable.

And when they need you to, step in and take control by managing your own emotions and making the decision to Let Me Work with Them.

That's the most powerful way to Let Them know they can depend on you.

Resources

You can find more information, resources, and evidence-based tools for working with, not against, your kids here:

Dr. Ablon's appearance on [The Mel Robbins Podcast](#) "Harvard Psychologist Shares 6 Words That Will Change Your Family"

Dr. Ablon's [book](#) "Changeable: How Collaborative Problem Solving Changes Lives at Home, at School, and at Work"

Dr. Ablon's website: www.stuartablon.com

Think:Kids website: www.thinkkids.org

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