

Setting Limits: *Why saying no may be the most important gift you give your children*

It's hard to say no. Ask any parent of a young child, especially when it has been a long day at work, near the end of a long, rainy weekend day, or in the cookie aisle of the supermarket. There are plenty of times when it feels easier just to say "yes" just to get a little peace and quiet. These are the times to refocus yourself and remember just how important it is for children to have clear, consistent limits.

When parents set boundaries and expectations, they are helping their children feel safe and secure. If the rules are clear and children know what is expected of them, they learn not only how to regulate their own behavior, they also learn what your family values.

This doesn't happen overnight. When you begin establishing rules and limits and consistently making your expectations clear over time, you are providing your children with a toolbox of skills they can use to navigate the emotional and behavioral challenges they will face throughout their lives.

It's both impossible and undesirable to manage setting limits at all times and in all circumstances. What matters most? Protecting your child from harm, looking after personal property, respecting and caring for other people—these are commonly-held principles for everyone.

The other limits and boundaries you set depend on what is most important to you as a family; while the guiding principle remains the same ("A good night's sleep is important"), the details (actual bedtime) will of course change over time as your child develops physically and emotionally. Other situations to consider are screen time, food choices, being left unsupervised, and of course, phone and driving privileges. As children mature into teenagers, these boundaries evolve into a means of helping them become responsible adults, especially when they are challenged by peer pressure.

Here are some things to think about when setting limits for your family:

- Knowing why a limit exists can make it easier to respect the limit.
- Keeping rules simple and consistent also makes it easier to help your child follow them.
- Use clear and straightforward language, focusing on "do" rather than "don't."
- Offering your child choices when possible helps exercise decision-making skills.
- Labeling behaviors rather than the child avoids the trap of promoting a poor self-image.

- Praising success makes everyone happy.

Most boundaries are not set once in stone for the entire course of a child's development.

You can also think of boundaries as a set of evolving expectations that reflect your child's developing brain. Involve your children in setting the rules and routines that structure everyday life in your family. Talking about why you have certain rules helps them to understand the reasons for having them and the consequences for not following them. You may also find that they see novel solutions that work for everyone!

Taking Action

Remember that children learn by pushing up against limits; as a parent, setting those limits and holding firm isn't conflict. The boundaries parents set for their families keep everyone safe, reinforce a family values, and teach children how to live with others.

Toddlers and Young Children

It's all about safety and establishing a routine for babies and very young children, but even when speaking to young children, how you communicate these limits is important.

Explain the limit in a positive way that explain why there is a boundary:

- "Hold my hand when we cross the street. There are lots of cars and you might get hurt."

Use an "I-message:"

- "I can't let you throw sand, you might hurt someone in the sandbox. Unless you stop, we'll have to go home."

Consequences should be logical:

- "If you yell loudly at the movie, we'll have to go home because other people can't hear."

Use "when" statement to communicate your expectations:

- "When you have washed your hands, you can have a snack."

Offer choices:

- "It's cold outside, you can wear your sweater or your jacket."

Older Children and Teens

It's important to keep your cool when talking about limits with older children and teens. Not only are you teaching self-control and responsibility, as a parent, you're modeling that behavior.

- Rules need to be specific. Have a family discussion so that everyone is on the same page and understands both the rules and the consequences.
- Create dialogue by involving your child in developing the rules and consequences; that way, even if they are not fully satisfied with the boundary, they will have a better sense of the rationale behind it.
- Consistently follow through with consequences.
- Recognize and encourage success and effort
- Keep the conversation going so that the boundaries you establish change both as your child grows and matures and can handle more responsibility. If rules aren't respected, keep talking so that problems can be addressed before they get too overwhelming.
- Reach out for help. There are lots of resources in the community: counselors at school, clergy at houses of worship, community organizations like COPE or others on our website ([hyperlink to website listings](#)).

Further Reading

Toddlers and Young Children

How to Set Effective Limits With Your Child

<http://www.ahaparenting.com/parenting-tools/positive-discipline/effective-limits>

Everyday Rules and Limits

<http://www.fredrogers.org/parents/everyday-experiences/everyday-limits.php>

Making Rules and Setting Limits

https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/sites/default/files/public/KMP_C3_ED_MakingRulesAndSettingLimits.pdf

5 Ways to Set Limits: *By Eleanor Reynolds*

http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article_view.aspx?ArticleID=91

CDC: Essentials for Parenting Toddlers and Pre-Schoolers: Creating Structures and Rules

<http://www.cdc.gov/parents/essentials/structure/index.html>

Teens

Questions for Setting Limits

<https://www.drugabuse.gov/family-checkup/question-4-setting-limits>

Understanding Challenging Teens

<http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/blogs/responding-struggling-teens-need-balance>

Keeping Teens Healthy by Setting Boundaries

<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/parents/keeping-teens-healthy-by-setting-boundaries>

Technology

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-digital-family/201011/eparenting-setting-limits-even-if-your-kids-know-more-you-do>

Internet Addiction

<http://www.addictionrecov.org/Addictions/index.aspx?AID=43>

Limiting Screen Time

<http://familyinternet.about.com/od/introtofamilycomputing/a/LimitComputer.htm>

Divorced Parents: Setting Consistent Limits

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-new-grief/201110/consistent-limits-help-children-survive-divorce>