



Setting Limits

Children need parents. They can't take care of all of their needs. They are not old enough to be responsible for their own safety. So you have a job! One thing you need to do is to set firm limits. You need to tell them what they should and shouldn't do until they are old enough to make good decisions. Limits protect children. Limits also can help children behave and keep them out of trouble. Children need limits to help them feel secure and safe. When you set limits your child learns that you care about her. She learns that you want her to be safe and responsible.

What are limits?

Limits are guidelines or rules. They are your specific expectations for the child. They say what he can do and what he should not do. For example, you might set a limit for going outside. You might say, "You may go outside only with a grown-up."

How to set effective limits

Set only a few important limits

Focus on important issues. Too many limits can be confusing. Your child might feel like he can't do anything. Four or five basic limits or rules will probably be enough. Choose limits that are most important to you. For example, these might be some good basic limits:

- You should always ask a grown-up for help in the kitchen. There are many dangerous things there.
- Use your words to say how you feel. You may not hit.
- Play with balls outside. Playing inside might break something.
- Ask to use other children's toys. Don't just take things from them.

Set reasonable limits

Consider your child's age and abilities. Before you set the rule, ask yourself, "Can my child do what I am asking her to do?" For example, do not expect toddlers to be quiet in church. But it is reasonable to expect a toddler to learn to whisper and to be quiet for a few minutes. It is not reasonable to expect a 6-year-old to clean his room by himself. But a 6-year-old can learn to pick up toys and put dirty clothes in the clothes hamper.

Be consistent

Children will break the rules. They test what you will do when they break them. So be consistent with the limits. Follow through in the same way as often as possible. Stay calm and focus on ways to fix the problem. It helps children to know what to expect.

Limits should be stated positively

Tell your child what you want him to do instead of only what not to do. For example, instead of saying, "Do not climb on the shelves," you could say, "Play on the floor." Instead of saying, "Don't touch anything," you could say, "Keep your hands in your pockets."

State limits clearly

Make sure your child understands the limit. Avoid big, general rules. For example, don't just say, "Be careful." Your child may not know how to do that or what it means. Explain limits clearly and simply. Also explain what you will do if she breaks the rule. For example, you could say, "Hold my hand while we walk on the road. I am afraid you could get hurt. If you let go of my hand, I will have to carry you."

Explain the reason for limits

Make sure you know why you are setting the limit. Then explain it in a simple way to your child. Children should understand the reasons for the rules. They can follow the limits better if they understand the reasons. They also can make better decisions if you are not there. For example, you could say, "Be gentle with your sister. She will be hurt if you push her, and she will cry."

Give your child choices within limits

Think about what is OK in a situation. Then let your child make a choice. Maybe the limit is that your child needs to wear a coat today. You could ask if he wants to put it on by himself or have you help. Maybe the child is asking for a soft drink. You may have a limit that does not include soft drinks. But you could still give him a choice. You could say, "You can have either milk or orange juice. What do you think?" Giving children choices can help them feel good about themselves. It can also help them be responsible.

Change limits as the child grows and changes

Children learn new things all the time. Change limits to match changes in the child's age and abilities. Some limits might never change. For example, you never want a child to hit. Other limits should change. For example, when the child is about 2 years old a limit might be, "You need to ask for help if you want a drink." When the child is 4 years old, the limit could change to, "If you need a drink, open the refrigerator and bring the juice carton to me."

Praise your child when she follows the limits

Limits are not punishment. Avoid making them always negative. Try to catch your child when she is being good and is following the limits. This will help her learn and feel good about herself. Be specific about your praise. Tell her exactly what she is doing well. For example, say, "I saw you take the ball outside to play. I am really glad you remembered the rule. Good job!"

Other Parent Pages that might be useful:

- What to expect from children
- Positive reinforcement and rewards

For more information go to:

<http://ohioline.ag.ohio-state.edu/hyg-fact/5000/5153.html>

Here you will find information on the different kinds of limit setting, keys to effective limit setting, and the difference between negative and positive discipline.

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