



Families ... generations of strength

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Setting Limits and Standing Firm

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What's the one thing that you can give to your child and you will never hear them say — "Oh, thanks. I really needed that!"? The answer is limits. So what are limits and why are they so important in parenting? Let's explore.

Limits are specific behavioral expectations parents set for their children. Setting limits defines the boundaries for acceptable behavior. Parents show their love, concern, and willingness to parent children when they set and use reasonable limits. But there is something funny about limits — children will never say they want/need/like them. However, children need clear, reasonable limits just as much as they need food and shelter. Limits are at the foundation of parenting responsibility.

There are two behaviors we see from children reared without limits. Some children will withdraw, too frightened to test the boundaries by themselves. Other children will deliberately misbehave to see who is watching to step in and provide the limit.

It has been said that "if a little bit is good, then more of it is better." That does not apply to setting and using limits. Having too many limits is stifling and prevents a child from learning on his/her own. There are four functions of limits. Limits protect people from physical harm, protect property, prevent psychological harm, and promote respect for others. Reviewing these functions will help parents decide if a new limit needs to be set and if an old limit is still a reasonable one. Let's look closer at setting limits.

'Limit Your Limits'

Limits must reflect your deeply held values. This conviction is what you draw on every time the limit is broken/tested, and you must enforce it. Children respond to limits that are real priorities for parents. Reduce the number of limits to the ones that really count. Limiting behavior that harms others or is deliberate disobedience is important at any age.

Set Reasonable Limits

What are reasonable limits? Reasonable means limits that allow a child to succeed. Parents are in the best position to determine "reasonable." Tune in to the child's individual personality and needs. Some limits are unreasonable because they are not humanly possible. Expecting too much can lower self-esteem and cause stress in your child. The child may become angry with him/herself for failing, or he/she may give up even trying. The child may also become angry and more defiant. Either way, if a child can not be good at succeeding, he/she is going to be tempted to be good at failing.

Clear and Positive

Children know what we expect of them only when we tell them in clear terms. Limits tell children what to do and how well it should be done (the standard). Make sure you have their attention. Children who understand the limits are much more likely to assume responsibility for their actions.

Consistent

Limits should not change from day to day or setting to setting. Inconsistently enforced limits are very confusing to children. Parents should discuss and agree on limits before they are presented to the children so there is a consistent response. This discussion and a consistent response will eliminate the, “well, mom always lets me do that when you aren’t here.” If children receive mixed messages about limits, they will test the limits more often.

Adapting

Many limits continue from year to year. Expecting children to treat one another’s possessions carefully is a reasonable limit at any age. Other limits should be changed as children grow older. Yet knowing when to make these changes and explaining them to children can be a difficult challenge for parents. Fortunately, the parents’ skills at setting limits improves with practice.

Input

Your children often have wonderful ideas and opinions about limits. By involving them in “limit discussions,” parents are more likely to gain their children’s cooperation in meeting the limit. “Discussions” do not always mean agreement. For some limits, there is no appeal process regardless of the child’s protests.

Whys

Explain the “why” behind the limit. Can a child verbalize the reason for the limit? Explanations make sense only if the limits are reasonable, clear, positive, enforceable, and very dear to values and convictions. If children understand the whys, they are more likely to accept them.

Enforceable

Children are going to “try” the limit, and parents must be willing to stand tough. In testing the limit, children are

testing parental commitment to their word. Children want their parents to love them enough to stand up for their deepest beliefs consistently. Charles A. Smith, Extension specialist from Kansas State University, shares these ideas for responsive discipline from *The Discipline Toolbox* that might be helpful in practicing the keys to effective limits.

The Toolbox

Show interest in what your child does. When you think children are about to misbehave, ask them to talk about what they are doing or what they have considered doing. This discussion might distract them from misbehavior.

Ask the child to restate the rule. If children know a rule and are acting on impulse, ask them to stop what they are doing and identify the limit they are breaking. Tell them whether their description is correct.

Use humor. When a lighthearted approach might work, use a humorous exaggeration to make a point or remind children of what you expect of them. Avoid ridicule or sarcasm.

Express strong disappointment. Describe honest feelings or discouragement or apprehension about a misbehavior.

References

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