

Establishing and Maintaining Healthy Boundaries for Children

Children are new to being human, and lack the experience and knowledge necessary to be in charge. Setting limits for children provides security for them to learn and develop into individuals capable of making safe and healthy choices for themselves. First, healthy boundaries keep children physically and emotionally safe. Second, healthy boundaries teach children how to behave and interact in a broad range of life situations and relationships. In addition, establishing healthy boundaries for children makes your job as parent or caregiver easier. Knowing your own boundaries will help you set and observe healthy boundaries with and for your children.

Children want to know who is in charge and what “the rules” are. They take comfort in knowing that an adult is in charge. There is security in knowing what to expect, in predictability and routine, and in support. Rules/boundaries/limits help your child to feel safe AND THEY HELP YOU TO FEEL SANE. Your job is easier when the boundaries are clear, the results of crossing them are clear, and everyone understands both. Children who feel secure are free to explore and learn.

When children explore the boundaries adults set for them, they are learning what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. It is their job. Children learn that their behaviors impact others in their community – family, school, social circles and the larger world.

As you establish the rules in your home, decide what works for you and your family, and set only as many rules as you really need. Physical and emotional safety should always be the top priority. Ask yourself, “Why am I making this rule? Is it to teach an important skill to my child? Is it to avoid dealing with an underlying issue? What is my motivation? Is this my response because I am tired, stretched thin or stressed?” Establish and implement your guidelines with love, and be consistent in follow through. Consistency does not mean that you should be rigid. Say “yes” as often as you can. There is not one “right” way to always respond, and there will be times that call for your flexibility. It’s helpful to strategize before you find yourself in a situation where you need to act. Responding in the heat of the moment can end up being more of a reaction than a thoughtful response.

Ideally, you begin establishing healthy boundaries for children when they are born. You create a safe environment for them to learn to walk. You move unsafe objects out of their reach. You teach them to sit down while eating or drinking, to hold your hand in a parking lot, that it is unsafe to touch the woodstove. You secure them in their car seat. You tell them what you are doing and why – “I want you to be safe.” Keep it simple when children are young. Get down to their level and use a clear, authoritative (not angry) voice. Very simply state your expectation and offer your support – “I can help you” – which is very different from doing something *for* your child. Be specific and state your expectations in the positive, saying exactly what it is that you want rather than what you don’t want. “It is not okay to hit people – when we hit it hurts. We use gentle touches. We use words to solve our problems.” Make your requests about the expectation rather than about the child. “That was not a good choice” rather than “You

are bad/wrong/stupid”. Sincerely commend a child for making an effort, and acknowledge progress.

Rules will change for each child as he or she develops. Avoid putting a child in the position of making a decision he or she is not yet ready to make. Consider each child’s age and level of maturity. As children grow and mature, expand their choices and introduce new boundaries to protect their physical and emotional well-being. Ask them to consider the impact of their actions on others. “When you do that, it hurts his feelings.” Teach them to let others know how they are feeling – “When you said that it hurt my feelings! Let’s talk about it.” Offer greater responsibility as each child can handle it, and associate consequences with choices. Keep consequences reasonable and logical in relation to the behavior, as well as something that you are willing to live with. When a child does something wild, try to remain calm and matter-of-fact. Remember that it is the behavior that is a problem, not the child.

Actively engage children in the process. “I know it’s hard for you to keep your room tidy. How can we work together to make that happen?” “It seems like a struggle to get your homework done. What can I do to help you?” Ultimately, their answer has to work for you, and they may need some good suggestions and guidance to get started. But you are teaching them to think for themselves, so that when you are not around to hold their hand or step in on their behalf, your children will be able to make physically and emotionally safe and healthy choices for themselves.

Practice healthy boundaries yourself. Model the behaviors you are asking of your child. If it is not okay for them to scream and throw things when they are upset, model safe and effective ways to deal with anger. If you don’t want your child to hit others, model safe and effective ways to handle frustrating situations. If it is not okay for them to speak unkindly to or about others, model courtesy and respect for others. It is vital to model, teach and support our children with healthy boundaries from birth so that they can incorporate them into their lives and move successfully and respectfully in the world.

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