

Setting Limits for Children

You need a license to drive, a license to fly – but you don't need a license to be a parent, although being a parent is probably the most important responsibility one takes on in life. Most of us go into parenting with little more to guide us than our own experiences growing up. We pass on what we learned – the good and the bad – to our children. If your parents were positive and nurturing, chances are you will be, too. But you may not automatically know the best way to handle a situation. And often what you think is good discipline may not be the best way to help your child learn to behave.

Like adults, kids often succeed through trial and error. Children sometimes learn the boundaries of appropriate behavior by stepping beyond its limits. That's where we come in as parents. We must teach our kids appropriate limits – what the boundaries of appropriate behavior are.

Testing limits is natural for children as they grow toward independence. It's their "job." Your job as a parent is to set clear, consistent limits that keep them safe and secure while allowing them to grow.

As parents, we must teach our children that consequences follow their actions. If we do this in a controlled, loving family atmosphere, they are more likely to fully consider the effects of their behavior. Everything we do has a consequence. Sometimes it's small; sometimes it's not. If you drive through a red light, you're liable to get a ticket or cause an accident. A small child who runs into the middle of the street may suffer consequences so severe that he or she won't have the opportunity to repeat that mistake.

Sometimes the consequences are good. If you are consistently honest, you're usually trusted by people who know you. As obvious as this seems, the idea of consequences must be stressed over and over and emphasized through actions. As parents, we must establish consequences that keep children from repeating undesirable behavior and at the same time, teach them to make good choices.

If you are rigid or shaming and the consequences you set are harsh or carried out in anger, chances are you are setting yourself up for problems in the long run. Anger in parents causes anger in children, shaming causes low self-worth and inappropriate punishment causes resentment. On the other hand, setting rules without enforcing consequences, being inconsistent in enforcing consequences or buffering kids from the results of their actions sends the message that there aren't any consequences for inappropriate behavior – or that Mom and Dad will come to the rescue if the misbehavior is outside the home. It's hard to find the right balance in setting and enforcing rules with children. It's a growing experience for you and your kids.

Be reasonable, fair, consistent and prompt when enforcing consequences. If a rule is set, hold your children to it. Don't act in anger; you'll have less control of the situation. Let yourself calm down and discuss the consequences rationally. One thing to remember is to tell the difference between the child and the inappropriate behavior. Make sure your child

knows you love and respect him or her, but that you do not approve of his or her particular behavior.

If your child's behavior doesn't hurt anyone, or doesn't stop him from learning or having success in other areas, you might ask yourself why certain behaviors bother you. Is there a good reason? If not, maybe it shouldn't be an issue.

Use encouragement and praise when your children do good things. Many children grow up in families where the only communication between parents and children is negative. Be open and honest with your praise. Tell the child how proud you are of him or her. Be realistic and positive!

Parents who have a good relationship with their children are thoughtful rather than reactive and offer children choices that promote cooperation and positive decision-making.

Here's a checklist for healthy limit setting with children:

- Be consistent.
- Treat children with respect.
- Do away with double standards.
- Emphasize the positive.
- Be supportive.
- Set children up for success.
- Establish clear boundaries.

Just talking about your problems sometimes leads to new solutions. If you or someone you know needs information, guidance or help, contact a Family Support Program in your community.