



Ohio State University Extension Fact Sheet

Family and Consumer Sciences

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Parents: Setting Limits

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Setting limits plays an important part in disciplining children. For parents, the goal of setting limits and disciplining children is to foster and develop children's inner self-control. By setting limits, parents communicate certain expectations of children's behavior.

Children want to know what the rules are and where parents draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. According to Ellen Galinsky, a child development expert, "Limits make children feel safe." When a parent cares enough to prevent a child from doing something that is seriously out of line, the child feels more secure and trustful.

By setting limits and disciplining children, parents show love for their children. Through well-defined limits and discipline, parents also help prepare their children to adjust and become contributing members of the outside world.

Kinds of Limits

No two families are alike. Children and parents have different needs. When establishing rules or limits, it is important to consider individual and family needs to determine the number and kind of limits. Parents need to consider what rules will be most important in guiding children's behavior. As parents set limits, it is important to think carefully and be clear about which behaviors must be stopped and which can be overlooked. Set as few limits as possible. When too many rules or limits exist, parents find themselves disciplining children every time they turn around, causing the child to think there is something wrong with

them. Research conducted by Coopersmith (1967) and Sears (1957) shows that establishing firm limits -- along with a warm, simple explanation of the reason for the rule -- enhances children's self-esteem (Hendrick, 1984).

As a general rule, children must not be allowed to seriously hurt themselves or someone else either physically or emotionally. They should not be allowed to damage anyone else's property either.

Stating limits or rules in positive terms directs children toward acceptable behavior. Following are examples of some positively stated limits:

- Keep pop and food in the kitchen so it doesn't spill on the carpet.
- Walk in the house so you don't fall and get hurt.
- Toys need to be put away once you're finished playing so they will be easy to find the next time you want to play.
- Play in the yard, away from the street. Mommy and Daddy don't want you to get hurt by a car.
- If you're angry with Jimmy, tell him with words. In our family we do not call each other names because it hurts feelings.
- Take good care of your toys and keep them out of the walkways so they don't get broken.
- Take good care of your books. Turn the pages carefully so the pages don't get torn. When pages get torn, it's hard to read the story.
- You need to sit on the swing when swinging so you don't fall and hurt yourself.

Benefits of Setting Limits

Setting limits provides children with guidance before they get into trouble. Children know from the beginning what is expected. By age five, many children can help decide some of their rules. These rules need to be consistent with children's abilities. Children are more likely to follow the rules because they have a better understanding about the rules and why the rules exist. Involving children in making rules also gives them the opportunity to begin making some decisions.

In summary, having firm control and simple, clear-cut reasons for limits are effective ways to help children build inner control and establish the beginnings of a conscience in young children (Hendrick, 1986).

References

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