

Healthy Boundaries, Healthy Children

Providing children the opportunity to feel heard, participate in family activities, and share in decision-making helps them build the skills necessary to navigate the demands of life. Providing opportunities for them to make small choices, i.e. “would you like the blue or green one?” is also a great way to help them practice for making big choices. These are ways to share power with children, giving them small areas of control within their lives: allowing them to exercise the “control” muscle that they will soon very much need.

However, sharing power can also lead to giving too much power or control to children. Giving them too much control can lead to the exact opposite of the healthy well-balanced child we all strive for. **Sharing power and control works best when parents / caregivers have well-established limits and understand boundaries within the family.** Please read below for more information on this very important topic:

Setting Limits

Why set limits? Besides the perfunctory safety issues, **setting limits teaches children how to gain self control, which in turn allows them to regulate their behavior so that it is socially acceptable.** Socially acceptable behavior is a good thing; it is very difficult to perform in school, play at a friend’s house, have meaningful relationships, raise a family, or hold down a job with socially unacceptable behavior.

Setting limits helps children feel safe. Little children do not like to feel out of control. For children to grow and thrive they need a secure home with structure. Kids want a set bath time, bedtime, wake-up time etc. Knowing “what happens next” is important to a child’s sense of well-being. Without too much rigidity, parents should set a schedule and live by it.

It can be tough for parents to set limits because it means saying no. Knowing that part of a child’s development is pushing the limits in an attempt to gain independence is the key. If the parent gives in or fails to discipline, the family will suffer, power shifts from parent to child, and it becomes the classic case of the tail wagging the dog. A parent is doing no favor to a child by allowing the power to shift from parent to child.

Parents should parent, not befriend. They should guide with a warm, loving, comforting, patient, understanding, kind and firm touch. By establishing and enforcing rules that, for instance, limit how long children are watching television or on the computer, parents remind children that they have limits, and that the parent is in charge. Setting limits helps build the child’s respect for the parents. **Setting limits also teaches children how to set their own limits as they mature.**

Boundaries

Imagine a circle around the parents and another around the children in your family. How do power and communication flow between these two circles? The boundary between the parent circle and the child circle in a family can be both too porous or loose or too rigid and inflexible.

When boundaries are too loose in a family, the children have inappropriate power and control. This is often a family in chaos. The children call the shots, but deep down they are terrified of the power they hold over their parents. Even when the children are not exhibiting serious behavior problems, loose boundaries are seen in parent-child relationships that place too much of the adult world in the child's hands.

When boundaries between parents and children are too rigid, all of the power and control lies within the parent circle. Not only is 'no back talk' the rule, no real communication takes place between the two circles. In a family with too rigid boundaries, children often move into an adolescence of withdrawal or extreme rebellion.

Boundaries in families seem complex and everchanging. But, if you observe yourself and your children, you can usually get a sense of whether your boundaries tend to be too loose or too rigid; whether they shift between the two extremes or stay within the healthy balance of firm boundaries that allow age-appropriate communication and power to flow between parents and children. Here are some tips for maintaining healthy boundaries in your family.

1. Don't share adult gossip with your kids. The problems of your friends and relatives, adult dating issues, and other types of conversations you would have with adults should stay in adult circles.
2. Enjoy shared activities with you child but don't be such a buddy that you lose your authority as the parent.
3. Allow your child to share opinions and input on family activities in an atmosphere of shared family goals. At the same time, maintain you parental right to make the final decisions.
4. Give your child age-appropriate opportunities to make choices and to build his decision-making skills gradually through childhood. (*handout outside Glenview office*)
5. Maintain a strong bond between the adults in the family and never draw children into parental arguments and resentments.
6. Don't be afraid to assert yourself when your child needs instruction or discipline. Learn and practice strategies to prevent child misbehavior from spiraling out of control.
7. Avoid overly harsh or arbitrary rules and discipline practices. Use discipline with dignity that is consistent, fair, and when appropriate, flexible.

Learning to establish boundaries is a critical part of human development. Children need to understand both about physical and emotional boundaries. **Parents should model good boundary setting, and discuss with children that setting boundaries teaches other people how to treat them. Discuss with children that they have a right to be treated the way they want to be treated. Setting boundaries teaches children how to protect themselves both physically and emotionally.**

We can explain what appropriate **physical boundaries** are to children and how to establish their own personal space and to respect the personal space of others. A child's sense of physical boundaries is very different than that of an adult. Observe a well-loved teacher reading to a circle of little children; if the teacher doesn't establish boundaries some of the children will literally be sitting on her by the end of the story. Help children to read the cues that people give them and listen to their own inner voice that tells them when they feel uncomfortable with the proximity of another person. Parents should be gentle; the goal is not to scare children away from other people. Instead, the goal is to teach what is socially acceptable in order for children to relate well and comfortably to other children and adults.

Emotional boundaries are a more difficult concept to teach. Many people go into adulthood without understanding how to establish healthy emotional boundaries. Adults who feel pushed around at work, or feel taken advantage of by friends and relatives, often haven't learned how to establish good emotional boundaries. Parents should teach children how to communicate directly and honestly. Children must be taught to have dignity and respect for themselves and learn that they are priceless and special. Parents should not blame children for "making them" whatever: angry, sad, heartbroken, or frustrated. **A good way for parents to model healthy emotional boundaries is to take ownership of their own feelings.** Children act exactly how human children are supposed to act, they should not feel responsible for the emotions of their parents. Parents can teach children that people are responsible for their own feelings. Children should not be burdened in childhood thinking that their normal behavior can "make" their parents feel a certain way or vice versa, a parent's lousy mood shouldn't affect a child's emotions. Parents do not want their children's emotions to be enmeshed with their own. Quite the opposite: everyone should take ownership for their own feelings.

How to Establish Boundaries?

Establishing boundaries involves several steps.

1. The first step is to get clear with yourself as to what the values and rules are for your family.
2. The second step is to figure out how you will hold this boundary in the moment, in a calm and unflappable way.
3. Third, what are the tools you will use to help your child, i.e. redirection, warnings & time-outs etc..
4. Fourth, what will you do if you feel as if you cannot hold the boundary anymore but you know you need to for your child's sake?
5. What is your plan?
6. What does your child learn from pushing against the boundary – what active ways do you have to help your child make restitution (fix the issue, conflict, problem)?

Let's look at each step briefly: First of all, **this starts with knowing yourself** and what you model for your child through your actions. You must have thoughts regarding what the most important things are in your life. What are the values of your family and what are the rules of your house? After those boundaries and rules of the house are established: in your head, discussed with your spouse, etc; then you must think through how to be consistent with those boundaries

and what will happen when a child pushes against the boundary. Will you be a wall that falls when they push against it (and this “falling” could be giving in or just falling apart and yelling or crying yourself) or will you be solid and calm but not moveable? So, how will you hold the boundary in a calm way? Many of us have what I call a “breaking point” What is yours? Is it after your child has been on the floor screaming for over an hour? Is it your child hitting you? Is it your child hitting the baby? Is it running around the house? How will you deal with your own breaking point? We are all human, so what is your plan for when the breaking point occurs?

What does the child learn by pushing against the boundary? With children under the age of 5, they cannot think ahead to consequences at all. I have one friend who told me once that small children who don’t want to brush their teeth are not choosing cavities. With a child under the age of 5, it really is up to you to help your child meet the boundary that you have decided upon by regulating the environment, the rhythm of eating and sleep, the amount of physical activity, the amount of supervision you are providing. A child needs pretty constant checking in and supervision up to the age of 10 according to The Gesell Institute books. Other tools include singing, fantasy and movement, your gentle hands redirecting, distraction, and giving the child a job to do. Perhaps your most important tool for the child is that of restitution. **The child will need your help with this, but it is important for a child to see how they can fix something instead of hearing a lecture about the problem.**

With a child of six, you have the above tools, plus you can add a few more choice and more pointed sentences about what we do where. I direct you to the fine book, “You’re Not the Boss of Me! Understanding the Six/Seven Year Transformation” as available through www.waldorfbooks.com Story-telling can become a fine way to assist your child in seeing the situation from a different perspective. I recommend Susan Parrow’s “Healing Stories for Challenging Behaviour” as a reference.

With a child of seven and eight, now we are moving into even more of the why’s in simple terms. Logical reasoning is not present, but as children approach nine, they do understand a bit more about what will happen when they do something. Their responses are immature, often riddled with emotion, but they are learning. Criticism will tear them down, as they cannot separate your criticism of their behavior from themselves, so do be careful to speak with your child simply when things are calm and to help the child to make restitution. Start empowering them to be able to think about fixing a problem rather than just hearing a lecture about the problem. Children from nine to twelve are really in the beginning of the foundation years for character development as we know it, and the teenaged years even more so.

Quick Tips

Use words and follow-through. Your words can give information about safety and how things work. This lets them know that you want them to have information so they can make wise decisions on their own some day. But if the child continues acting out, removing them from the situation demonstrates to them that their safety is most important.

Help them find something they can do. Often kids get "stuck" in an activity and are unable to figure out something else to do. If you can suggest other safe things to do instead of “”, you let them know you appreciated their ideas, but it just needed some refinement.

Express your feelings, honestly and safely. If you begin to feel mad the tenth time they act a certain way or do a certain thing, it is important to communicate your feelings to them. Children are experts at reading feelings, so it's useful to give a name for what their already perceiving. Communicating honestly gives them useful information about the nature of anger. Yet it's also important to avoid blaming or scaring children. Saying, "I feel really frustrated when I tell you over and over to stop banging on the window," is a lot clearer and less judgmental than, "You never listen. You're driving me crazy!" The tricky part is that most of us are still learning appropriate ways to express our anger, so we may not get it "right" the first time. But, as we try to learn more effective ways to express our anger, we demonstrate to our children that adults can grow too.

It's a little like putting a kid in the driver's seat of a car. He'll have a great time. But he's bound to steer the car off the road and hurt both of you.