

SETTING LIMITS

Why are limits important and how do I set them appropriately?

Why are limits important?

Limits are important because they make children feel safe and protected. When children know what to expect they feel more secure.

Limits can be hard to set!

It can be hard to see your child upset, especially if it feels like you are the cause of it. It may feel easier to give in and allow your child to change their mind or plan. However, as caregivers it's our job to set limits and teach children that it's ok to feel upset. Feeling a range of emotions is part of life, and we can use their reactions to teach them coping skills. Some preschoolers may want a hug immediately after you set a limit, while other children may choose space away from you to calm down. It is important to acknowledge your own feelings about setting limits and appropriately express to your child how you are feeling. This will help your child understand adults can get frustrated too, why you might be feeling this way, and model appropriate ways to communicate frustrations.



Some guidelines for setting limits with your child

Language and Approach: Make choices and limits clear for your child by using simple, straightforward language. Ensure that the consequence is something that you can control. For example, if you give your child two choices for breakfast and they end up unhappy with what they chose, do not make them something else. Let them know you made what they chose, and they can eat it later if they decide that they are hungry and are ready to eat. If you choose to backtrack on the limit and make them something different for breakfast your child will learn that you do not mean what you say. Similarly, if you find yourself saying “I already told you...” in regards to a limit, you probably aren't following through on a limit you've already set.

Expectations and limits need to be logical and age-appropriate, and they should never be a surprise. Losing a bedtime book because they refused to put on their shoes in the morning is not logical, and is too far removed from the moment. However, letting your child know that if they do not put on their shoes quickly they will not have time to play outside before getting in the car is related to their actions, and immediate. It also allows them to make a choice while knowing what the consequence will be. Limits should change over time as your child's language abilities and cognitive understanding grow. Remind your child about expectations and give them transitional warnings, such as “two minutes” or a timer.

When setting limits, get down on your child's level so that you can look them in the eye while keeping a calm tone of voice. It is important to take children's reactions and experiences seriously. Something that may seem





What can you expect to see when first starting to set limits?

Limits will be more challenging in the beginning while they are new for you and your child. Know that it will get harder before it gets easier. You will get over the hump! It can be mentally and physically exhausting to set limits, so when possible, support other caregivers by taking turns and offering breaks as needed. It's important to stay clear and consistent about your expectations for your child.

What can you do before needing to set a limit?

Reinforce appropriate behavior and use positive language. Your child wants your attention, and if you acknowledge when they make appropriate choices, they are more likely to repeat these behaviors. When possible, give your child choices and control. These choices should always lead your child to your final goal. For example, if it is almost time for your child to clean up their toys before dinner, you can ask them "Do you want to clean up your blocks first, or your cars? You can choose." That puts the power in their hands about how they can choose to clean-up but still ends with them cleaning-up. It's also important to pick your battles. Decide what really matters to you and consider if enforcing certain "rules" is going to create more of a problem than it's worth.

like an overreaction to an adult can be significant for a young child. Don't use sarcasm with your child; preschoolers aren't able to understand it and that will make things more confusing for them.

It is also important when giving your child choices that you finish the conversation with "you decide" or "you choose". For example, if you gave your child an option of two outfits to wear to school and they are refusing to pick, tell your child "you can choose which outfit to wear, or I am going to choose. You decide". That puts ownership back on your child to make an appropriate choice.

Calming Down: When your child becomes upset because a limit was set, it is important to empathize and validate your child's feelings, even if they don't make sense to you. Children might calm down when parents simply label their feelings for them or describe what is happening. When children feel that they have been heard and understood they are more likely to calm down because they won't feel the need to express their distress by screaming or crying.

Encourage your child to take as much time to calm down as they need, either with you or independently. Try creating a calm down space with your child in your home. This space can be the couch, a corner of their room, or even in a cardboard box. It should be a comfortable space that includes some of their favorite things, such as stuffed animals, books and quiet toys. Your child needs to help you create this space and choose which items to include. When the space is first created you may need to guide your child there, but the hope is that eventually they will learn to independently seek it out when they are feeling frustrated or upset. The space should never be used as a punishment or time-out space. While they are calming down, you can take this time to regroup before having a follow-up conversation with them.

Consistency: It is important to remain as consistent as possible when it comes to setting limits. Have a conversation with partners and other caregivers in your child's life to make sure you know what everyone's expectations are, and how they are communicated. All caregivers should set appropriate limits consistently. Otherwise, your child will quickly learn which adults in their lives will set limits and which ones won't.

Additional Resources on Limit Setting:

<https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/i-dont-like-the-choices-youre-choicing-me-how-to-set-enforceable-loving-limits>

<https://childmind.org/article/what-not-to-do-when-your-child-is-having-a-tantrum/>

<http://www.pbs.org/wholechild/parents/building.html>

<https://www.cdc.gov/parents/essentials/structure/index.html>

