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Setting Limits With Young Children

Our children need us to set limits for them. Clear limits help children feel safe. While a young child may struggle to have her own way, something inside of her realizes that she is not ready to call all the shots. She depends on her parents and caregivers to stop her when her behavior becomes unreasonable. When the adults around her can set limits effectively, her world is more secure.

Parents need to set limits with children for their own sanity as well. The endless demands of toddlers and pre-schoolers would run us ragged if we could never say "no." Just how we set limits, however, can mean the difference between a child's cooperation and an all out power struggle. Cooperation is enhanced by using the following five-step system for setting limits with young children. The steps are:

- Listen,
- Validate the Intention,
- Set the Limit,
- Give an Explanation,
- Offer Redirection.

Listen

Listening to your child is the all-important first step. When a child does something they are not supposed to, ask them why.

"Billy, there's water all over the floor here. What's your idea? Can you tell me?" and "Katie, it seems like you are trying to hit Tony. Why do you want to hit him?"

While listening, it is very helpful to squat or sit by the child so that you are on the same level. Let your tone reflect that you really want to know what the child is thinking. Younger children may not be able to verbalize their intentions, so you may have to guess, and ask them if you are right.

"Are you experimenting with pouring? Is that it?" and

"Are you angry that Tony took that toy from you? Are you wanting to make him give it back?"

Validate the Intention

Each action of a young child is in some way an expression of their developmental stage. The true intention behind both acceptable behavior and misbehavior is best understood in this context. Sometimes, however, parents mistakenly attribute a child's behavior as intentionally wrongful. In response to my own daughter I have heard myself think, "This little twerp is determined to get my goat!"

Behaviors that appear disrespectful or irrational to parents can have an entirely different meaning to the children acting them out.

Young children cannot always express their true intentions. Parents, therefore, need to be aware of the developmental needs youngsters are addressing in behaviors we may find objectionable.

There are six main developmental needs underlying most misbehavior we see in young children:

the need for security, the need for attention, the need to explore, the need for mastery,

the need to individuate, and the need to feel powerful.

To grow into healthy adults all children have to express these needs.

The need for security is a child's most fundamental need. When adequately met, children grow up to be confident, independent adults.

When children are forced to become independent prematurely, however, they may continue to harbor feelings of insecurity for years to come. Children who are acting clingy, shy, or dependent may be trying to let you know that they need you to help them feel safe.

The need for attention is present in both children and adults. As social beings we never really outgrow our need for attention. Adults usually find socially acceptable ways of getting the attention they need. Children, however, may not be so graceful. They will try a whole range of tactics to get attention. Parents must set limits with unacceptable attention getting strategies, such as screaming at the top of one's lungs. But we must also anticipate that our children do need our attention, and it works better to give it to them before they resort to obnoxious behaviors in search of it.

The need to explore leads youngsters to try new things. Sometimes it means trying things they are not supposed to try, in order to explore what will happen. Doing something against the rules may be a child's way of trying to find out what is so special about the forbidden activity. A child testing a limit may also be exploring whether the rules will really be enforced.

Children also have a drive to master whatever they can in their world. Most parents know well the tantrum that can ensue when a child is interrupted from something that she really wanted to do by herself. Sometimes children continue to try to do something you tell them not to because they want so badly to be able to master it. Exploring and trying to master things are how children learn how to live in this world.

Individuation is another key developmental task of young children. As they grow children need to explore what defines who they are, and how they are different from their parents. Sometimes this comes out in the words, "I hate you!" It can be hard for parents to adjust to the continuing independence young children strive for.

Children will strongly object to attempts by parents to get them to feel the way we want them to. To claim the right to think or feel differently from their parents a child may directly defy a parent. When this happens it is important to acknowledge the child's right to their own thoughts and feelings, even though we may not allow certain behaviors. Making this differentiation may help dissolve such power struggles.

"You can tell me that you think it is not time for bed, and you can be angry at me for making you go to bed now. But we do need to go to bed, so while you tell me what you think, let's start getting ready."

The need children have to feel powerful is very understandable if we put ourselves in their shoes. Imagine being surrounded by giants twice your size who always tell you what to do. They decide whether you are right or wrong. They have the power to scoop you off your feet at any moment. And you are totally dependent upon them for all your basic needs. In such a situation anyone would crave to experience him or herself as being powerful. Sometimes children express this by swatting a parent as hard as they can. Sometimes they get to experience power by taking a toy from another child. Sometimes they enjoy feeling powerful by playing with toy weapons. It is important not to misattribute these actions to a desire to hurt others. Rather, children are often simply trying ways to claim power that might protect them from being the ones who are always overpowered.

Understanding these developmental needs (security, attention, exploration, mastery, individuation, and feeling powerful) enables us to understand the intent of a behavior we set limits on. Separating the intention behind a behavior from the behavior itself is one of the keys to good limit setting. Children are much more likely to cooperate with a limit if they do not feel shamed for the intent behind their behavior.

Conversely, if a child thinks you are telling them that they are bad for wanting to do something against the rules, they may resist you to prove that it is you who is wrong. Validating the intention clarifies that the child is not bad, but rather is expressing an understandable need, even when the way they are expressing themselves is unacceptable. Here are some examples of validating a child's intentions:

"You really like exploring with pouring, don't you? Is that why there's milk all over the table?" and

"You want to show Tony it's not okay for him to grab your toys Is that right? Is that why you hit him?"

By validating the child's impulse we differentiate between the person (who has a developmentally appropriate impulse) and the behavior (which is not okay). Without validation, a child may feel shamed (that they are bad for wanting to do something against the rules).

Set Limit

Part of a young child's search for mastery in this world is learning what the rules are. As care givers we can help by making the rules very clear. Children can instantly pick up any signs of ambivalence or apology in our tone. They are good mirrors of our own clarity. If we are consistent with the limits we set, we allow them to adjust to these limits and move on to other play. If we are inconsistent, we may spend hours trying to convince them that this time we really mean it. Here are some examples of unclear limit setting:

Parent: Billy, do you think you could do that in the bathtub?

Child: No.

Correction: Billy it is not okay to pour in here. The floor in here cannot get wet. You have to go in the bathroom and set up your things in the tub if you want to pour.

or

Parent: It's not nice to hit others, Katie. If you do, they won't want to play with you, and then you won't have any friends.

Child: I don't care!

Correction: It is not okay to hit, Katie. Tony will get hurt if you hit him. If you are angry you can use your words or you can ask for my help. But you cannot hit. Do you understand this rule?

Offer an Explanation

Often children can accept a limit more easily if we tell them the reason behind it. Even if they can't yet understand the reason, they feel respected by our efforts to explain it to them. We work against a child's need to feel powerful when we expect them to simply do as we say without offering them a reason. Giving them the real reason also builds honesty into the foundation of our relationships with them. If you distort the truth in order to have them more readily comply you may unwittingly be setting up an irresistible urge in a child to explore if you are right or not. For instance:

"Don't touch the lamp cord. The electricity in it will kill you."

could be more truthfully explained:

"Don't touch that lamp cord. It has electricity in it that could kill you if you touched it where the cord might be frayed. It's too hard for a child to tell if it's safe, so I'd like you to not touch it at all, just to be safe. Understand?"

Needless to say, distorting the truth will also make it hard for your child to trust you in the future. And if they follow your example of dishonesty, you may soon not be able to trust them.

Crying

Children sometimes cry when faced with a limit. That's okay. Crying is how they grieve their disappointment. Caregivers can help by allowing the crying to run its course. It is not helpful to distract the child or otherwise cut off the crying. If the child isn't allowed to finish grieving they may be moody afterwards. Being present with a crying child can take patience sometimes. We have all had our own feelings stuffed so many times that we may, out of habit, teach our children to stuff theirs. If, instead, we just hold our children close and make room for their tears we allow for the healing that grieving brings.

If crying continues on and on without any sign of the feelings actually releasing, despite a parent's loving attention, then the crying may have another meaning. Crying that does not discharge is usually an attempt by the child to change the limit you have set. In this situation, soft words from a parent may actually mislead the child into thinking the limit is negotiable. Often the child needs to hear the limit firmly stated and acted upon so they can give up trying to change it.

One example is when a child cries upon being handed to a childcare worker. Usually, the longer the parent hangs around trying to stop the crying, the longer the child cries. As soon as the parent actually leaves, the crying continues only as long as is actually necessary to release the feelings. Then most children adjust and move on to other things.

Changing a Limit

It is not helpful to change a limit solely due to a child's crying or misbehavior. Doing so reinforces the child to use crying, tantrums, sulking, or whining to test limits rather than just to grieve. The caring parent may inadvertently reward such behaviors. The perceptive child will then repeat these successful strategies over and over. This may result in what many people might call a "spoiled child". Spoiling does not, however, spring from generous attention to a child's needs. Rather, it is a result of granting a child's wishes in response to unappealing behavior. The principle can be communicated to the child this way:

"I see that you are upset. If you would like to talk to me about it, I want to listen. But I never change a limit I have set in response to whining or tantrums, so you will have to speak to me in a normal voice if you want to talk about this further."

Sometimes a child's crying may cause a parent to re-evaluate the wisdom of a particular limit. Such re-evaluation is important because our children are always growing. Old limits regularly become outdated. Caregivers must balance the value of being consistent with limits and the need to appropriately revise old rules. When you change your mind about a limit, it is helpful to explain to the child that you have decided to change the rule and explain why. For example:

"We have had a rule against you climbing on that counter because it wasn't safe when you were younger. But now you are able to climb on it safely, so I have changed my mind and now it is okay to climb there."

Explain why you are changing the rule rather than just letting the old rule slide away in response to the child's crying, whining, or disobedience. Children actually feel safer knowing that rules change because of reasons, and not because of tantrums.

Set the Limits You Need

Some limits we set are for our children's safety, others are for our own convenience. Both types of limits are important. It's good for children to have freedom to explore, and room for self-direction. We can provide this by creating child-friendly play places that do not require a lot of rules. Sometimes, however, in our efforts to grant our children freedom, we overestimate the limits of our own energy and patience. When we are tired or overwhelmed we do need to set limits that protect our own sanity. For example:

"I know that you are used to playing with glue and paints whenever you want, but right now I am very tired and I really don't want to clean up another project, so even though it's a fun idea, I'm saying "No" to glue and paints right now."

When we are honest with ourselves about our own limits, then we can set the limits we need our children to respect before we come to the end of our rope.

Enforcing Limits

The best way to get children to respect the limits we set is to enlist their cooperation and make the limits clear. Children naturally want to cooperate. They need our attention and they want us to be proud of them. If we give them good attention and express our approval of them, we can count on a general willingness on their part to please us. When we do not attend to them well, they are less motivated to cooperate with us.

When cooperation has failed, many parents turn to punishment as a way to enforce limits. Punishments, such as spanking, scolding, or isolating children, can gain their compliance, but there is a cost. A child begins to fear the people who punish him. Our children need to feel safe with us. We sacrifice some of this safety and closeness when we resort to punishment. In addition, a child being punished almost always internalizes a sense that she is bad for needing to be punished, a sense that she has failed.

In effective limit enforcement the parent helps to make sure the limit is kept, eliminating the need for punishment. Young children are not experts at impulse control. Their developmental needs are sometimes a priority ahead of doing what we tell them. If we trust them, under threat of punishment, to control themselves in ways they cannot, we have set them up for failure and set ourselves up for feeling angry with them for disobeying us. Children therefore need our help to stop themselves from breaking our limits. If a child is having trouble controlling himself, the parent should physically intervene, gently but firmly, to ensure compliance. Here is an example:

"Billy, I am moving this pitcher and these cups into the bath tub because it seems like you need help doing it right away. (Billy cries). I can see that this is upsetting you but I need it to be this way so that there is no more spilling."

Contrast this intervention with a punishment scenario:

"Billy, if you don't move to the bathroom now, I'm not going to let you do pouring for the rest of the day (Billy spills more). Okay. That's it! No more pouring for the rest of the day!"

In the first example the parent physically intervened to ensure the limit was kept, and the child got upset. In the second example, the parent threatened punishment, the child failed, and the parent got upset.

A good parenting motto might be: Let the child be upset at your limit, but don't let the child get you upset. Children ultimately feel safer with adults who set their limits in time and who keep close watch to make sure that children are successful in keeping to the rules. When a child gets your help to respect limits successfully he begins feeling proud of his good behavior. He identifies himself as a person who follows rules well. On the other hand, when we test a child's compliance, and then punish him for failing, we foster a more negative self-image. Effective limit enforcement helps children build success experiences.

Knowing when to intervene requires close observation of a child struggling with one of your limits. Intervening too soon thwarts a child from successfully controlling herself. Intervening too late allows the child to fail and may endanger the child (if the limit is a safety issue). Here is another example of effective limit enforcement in contrast to using punishment:

"I'm holding your arm to help you stop yourself from hitting, Katie. (Katie struggles). Now I'm moving us away from Tony because it seems like you need to be where you can be angry without hurting anyone (Katie cries loudly). We can get closer to Tony when I know that you are not going to try to hit him."

VS.

"Katie, if you hit Tony you will have to take time-out. (Katie hits Tony). No! Alright, time-out for five minute (Katie runs away). Katie, get in your room right now!"

Sometimes a parent cannot intervene in time to prevent misbehavior. When this happens there are lessons to be learned. The child needs to be told that the misbehavior is not okay and should not happen again. The parent needs to recognize that the child probably needs more help keeping this limit in the future. When children go through phases of biting other children, for example, they may need an adult nearby whenever they play with other kids. When a child has trouble stopping herself from getting into the cookie jar, then the cookie jar may need to be moved, or kept empty.

Some parents believe that when a child breaks a limit punishment is needed to teach them a lesson. In most cases, however, the child already knew about the rule he broke and knew the punishment for breaking it. The reason for his failure to comply is not ignorance. The real reason children break rules is that internal developmental needs compete with a child's own interest in cooperating. In any given moment, the needs for security, attention, exploration, mastery, individuation and feeling powerful may outweigh both the child's natural desire to cooperate and/or her fear of punishment. Rather than punish, a parent can help the child identify what the needs behind their misbehavior are, so that an alternative way of expressing those needs can be found.

Redirecting:

Redirecting is the final step of successful limit setting. Children will often accept a limit more easily if we help them find an alternative way to satisfy the impulse behind a prohibited behavior. How can they feel more safe? How can they appropriately ask for attention? How can they explore things safely? How can they master part of a skill that interests them, but is beyond them? How can they be different, and think and feel differently than you? How can they feel powerful in this world of big people?

Redirecting children helps them channel their unmet needs appropriately. Perhaps they cannot play with the sewing kit, but they can put their own things in a special pouch. They cannot bite their friends, but they can bite the teddy. They cannot climb the bookcase, but they can go outside and climb on the jungle gym. Children can also be redirected to another time.

"You can't do that now, but you can do it after lunch."

Giving a child a chance to make choices is a wonderful thing to include when you redirect their behavior. Having a choice between two or more acceptable alternatives helps a child with their need to feel powerful. It also develops their decision making skills. For example, a child who does not have a choice about whether or not to brush her teeth might be offered the choice of whether to do it before or after putting pajamas on.

Practice

The five steps of effective limit setting described above can be a parent or care giver's most valuable tools. I sometimes hear myself utter variations of this formula over a hundred times a day. Each step is important, and it takes practice to remember them all spontaneously. The following are examples of ways to put together all five steps: listen, validate the intention, set the limit, offer an explanation, and redirect.

"You are really wanting to explore new things on Daddy's desk, aren't you? The rule is that you cannot play with things on the desk, because Daddy needs to make sure nothing on the desk gets messed up. But you can play with things on your desk. Would you like help finding new things to play with on your desk?"

"Are you are wanting to play chase now instead of help get your jammies on? Is that your idea? Chase games are really fun for you, aren't they? It is time for bed now because it's very late and we both need to sleep. So I am not going to let you run away. We can play chase tomorrow, or after your jammies are on, I can chase you one last time into the bedroom."

"I hear that you want cookies because you like how they taste. We are not having cookies now because it is important to eat vegetables so your body stays healthy. But you can choose whether you want to eat five carrots and three green beans or three carrots and five green beans."

No early childhood is complete without a thorough exploration of limit testing. And no parenting technique can circumvent the need for young children to sometimes experience what it is like to be in direct opposition to their parents.

It is helpful to remember, however, that children have a strong drive to cooperate with adults. When this cooperation breaks down it is probably because the child has a developmental need that competes with their desire to cooperate Using these five steps of limit setting can help parents to address those needs, and engage more cooperation from their children.