

How to Set Effective Limits with Young Children

When we are caring for young children, as adults we have a responsibility to help children organize their experiences and emotions. Young children are still learning about their world, and need the help of their important adults. Research shows that children develop optimally when we set limits as necessary, and show empathy for the child when setting those limits. Effective limit setting occurs when adults take charge when needed and set limits that come along naturally. When empathy is shown by the adult, the child often complies with the limit more readily. Empathy is what allows the child to internalize the limit and gradually develop better self-control.

The first step to setting effective limits begins with forming a relationship with the child. Consider spending a few minutes every day playing with the child, asking him/her open-ended questions and finding out how he/she views the world. This is a way to form a connection with a child rather than the child feeling like he/she is only being told what to do and where to go. Then begin to set limits around keeping the child safe. When setting a limit around safety, offer genuine empathy the child can feel. For example, validate the child's feeling and experience first, then set the limit: "I can see you are angry with your sister, but it is not okay to hit." We would all like our child's life to be more about connection and discovery than about limits and frustration. By saying "no" too often, we can undermine the relationship with the child, and the child may begin to tune out because he/she feels disconnected. Redirecting the child to a more appropriate activity or distracting the child with something more socially appropriate is also a way of setting limits, "I can tell that you really want to jump (as child jumps on the couch), how about we go outside where we can jump around together."

It is also important to avoid mixed messages when setting limits. You can do so by telling the child *specifically* what you want the child *to do*. Then try using 3 tones of voices:

1. Your **normal speaking voice**, the way you would like your child to speak to other people (polite, civil, respectful).
2. A **high pitched voice** of praise/encouragement when your child has done something well.
3. A **low, firm, assertive neutral voice** used for placing a limit on the child's behavior.

Remember to match your facial expressions accordingly with each tone of voice. Make sure to reserve the firmer tone of voice only for limits around the safety of the child and others. Place the limit firmly, but with neutrality. This tone of voice is not in a punitive way but rather an assertive way letting your child know where the boundary lies. Children usually respond well when they can understand where their boundaries are, and their important adults are clear and consistent in setting limits.

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