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Dear Parents of Young Children – Setting Limits in Discipline?

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# Dear Parents of young children

## Setting Limits in Discipline

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

DO YOU LET your two-year-old decide when it is safe to cross the street? Or do you allow your four-year-old to say when he should go to the doctor?

### Why Set Limits?

Parents don't hesitate to set limits which have to do with the health or safety of little children. They are often uncertain about limits in other situations. This is partly because we have been shifting from a strict to a more permissive type of discipline and back again. Just how far back we should go is a big question.

The child who is given free rein or is allowed to "express" himself is still the subject of many jokes. Even more confusing is the fact that research has failed to demonstrate that any one method is the final answer in developing a sound personality.

Orlansky's study suggests that the total environment in which a child is reared must be taken into account. This would seem to place great emphasis upon the parent-child relationship and the feelings of parents about methods which they use.

Setting limits with little children can often upset the most enjoyable parent-child relationship. We need then to be clear about the value of setting limits and to use our best judgment in the limits which we impose. Having made a thoughtful selection we should not feel apologetic about what we have done.

Recently I enjoyed eating at a restaurant with two of the little children in our family. Janie and Teddy started out rather quietly, as children often do, somewhat awed by the unfamiliar surroundings. This changed

rather suddenly as they began to explore the various items on the table. The individually wrapped packages of sugar in the sugar bowl took their eye. With much glee they proceeded to remove the packages as well as to examine the contents.

The next object of their attention was the small table lamp which Janie turned off and on, tilting it at a dangerous angle.

### The Object is to Learn

Here obviously is a situation where some limits must be imposed if Janie and Teddy are to learn something about taking care of property as well as the rights of others. To keep them from taking all of the sugar, one might say, "We may have some of the sugar and some must be left for other people." You might even give each child a package of sugar to look at or take home.

In regard to the lamp one might say, "The lamp belongs to the man who lives here and helps to make the table look nice." Likewise showing the children how the lamp works and how dark it is without the light may take care of the lamp situation. Some children could accept such limits simply by being told. For some others it might be necessary to remove the light.



Setting limits as in this situation has a bearing on other relationships. If the children are kept within certain bounds, the waitress will probably feel more kindly toward them. As a result the children will be encouraged to be more friendly, and eating out will become an enjoyable learning experience. Furthermore, it is unfair to the children to be put in a position where they will be unwelcome simply because of the extra work or destruction which they may cause.

In general, consistency in rules and limits is comfortable and dependable to the child. Since he lacks experience in judging consequences of his behavior, he needs to be protected from his inevitable short-comings.

Eating out with little children may be a time for flexibility rather than consistency in limits. Perhaps at home the sugar bowl is a "no touch" item; eating out it may require some looking at and explaining.

### They Need Protection

Children also need to be protected from their own violent feelings and from expressing them in destructive ways. The mother of four-year-old Jill has been unable to take time away from the new baby to meet Jill's constant demands for a story. After several refusals, Jill shakes the baby's bed, rushes into the living room and sends the doll-cart crashing into the coffee table.

Holding Jill quietly and firmly until her temper tantrum has subsided will give Jill the feeling that she is not deserted when she is most in need of support. Showing Jill that you understand her feelings will keep her

from feeling guilty about what she has done.

After Jill has quieted down, it will be necessary to remind her of limits as far as the baby and the furniture are concerned. Children actually feel more secure if they can be sure of firm, consistent handling. This makes it easier for them to develop confidence in themselves.

### Stages of Development

Limits should take into account the stage of development of the particular child. Sometimes five-year-olds can be trusted to cross a street alone. This would not be true of a two-year-old. Or a three-year-old could be allowed to play three houses away, while a two-year-old should be confined to his own back yard. The two-year-old finds it hard not to touch the toys in the store, while the five-year-old can more easily accept this idea.

### Number of Limits

The number of limits which you set will depend upon you as a person, as well as upon your housekeeping standards. Mary's mother allows her to carry the freshly made gelatin salad to the refrigerator. In other homes this would not be allowed.

A good rule to keep in mind is to set only necessary limits. These would include limits to:

- Protect the health of a child.
- Protect the safety of a child.
- Protect property rights and the rights of others.
- Protect and support the child against his own strong feelings.

Imposing too many restrictions means constant interference. There are necessarily many restrictions in today's homes and in its surroundings which interfere with the child's need for activity and learning. If we add another set of restrictions the child may feel completely boxed in. He may become less spontaneous and creative than we would like him to be. Imposing too many restrictions too early may cause resentment. The child may seemingly just be waiting for the day when he will be out from under rules rather than accepting rules as a part of self-discipline.

### How to Set Limits

Once you have decided on reasonable limits, how can they be carried out? Let's take a simple situation in which it is necessary to impose a limit, such as, calling for your child after he has been playing at the neighbors. Let's look at different ways that this limit might be imposed.

(1) David is busy playing when his father enters the room and says, "Are you coming?" "No," says David, "I don't want to go home." "Well, that's just too bad, you're going anyway," as he hoists him up on his shoulder. David does not resist but a sullen look appears on his face.

(2) Mary also greets her mother with the words, "I don't want to go home." Mary's mother smiles, says that she is glad that Mary has been having so much fun but now they have to go and pick up Daddy. Perhaps next week Ronny can come over to their house. Mary waves a friendly good-bye to the neighbor.

(3) Kathy backs away and hides when she sees her mother approaching. She changes her mind but fearfully so, when her mother says, "Hurry up or I'll have to go and leave you."

(4) Dennis sets up a howl when his father enters, which does not let up when his father says, "Shame on you for acting like a baby."

(5) Ricky runs to meet his father, eagerly showing him the dump truck that he has been filling with milk bottle caps. The happy relationship with his father makes it easy for Ricky to bring an end to his play.

Which of the above methods of setting limits do you think would be most effective in disciplining a child? Do you sometimes use any of these methods? Is it likely that you use some on one day and some on another? More thought as to the methods which we are using most of the time will probably improve relations between you and your child.

### Suggestion:

For a few days write down the limits which you impose on your child. After you look them over, do they appear to be reasonable limits? Did you use too many, too few? In how many instances did your child willingly accept the limitation?

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When your child is required to wait for a time (as in a doctor's office), finger plays are often appealing:

Two little blackbirds sitting on a hill  
(hands closed, thumbs up)

One named Jack, one named Jill  
(wiggle one thumb, then wiggle the other thumb)

Fly away Jack, fly away Jill  
(put hand behind back, then other hand behind back)

Come back Jack, come back Jill.  
(return hands one at a time with thumb up)

How long since your children have dressed up in grown-up clothes? Girls love the fancy clothes and knickknacks from Mother's closet. Boys may prefer to be Indians and cowboys; both will love to dress up like characters in their story books.

A Parents Guide to Children's Reading is a publication of Pocket Books, Inc. It is designed to encourage more children to read more widely. Containing reading suggestions for children under thirteen, pages 3-36 are devoted to pre-school children.

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