

The Importance of Limit Setting

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Next to love limits are the most important thing parents provide their children, says noted pediatrician T.B. Brazelton. In my practice as a developmental psychologist, when I ask parents about discipline it is clear that many relate limits to punishment. In the dictionary, punishment is defined as “A penalty given for wrong-doing”. The definition for discipline is much more positive: “Training that produces moral or mental improvement....”. A moral framework is what we provide our children if we regard discipline as teaching and not punishment. Limits are a fundamental part of positive discipline and are instrumental in helping children with three important things: emotional security, self-control and mastery.

Emotional security and limits. A young child without limits is like a little boat floating on a big sea. He or she drifts along without a map. Limits moor children to a secure base. A child who has limits feels a sense of security, even though he or she may test the limits to make sure the mooring is secure! Testing limits is a part of internalizing limits. When parents are consistent with teaching their child what is and is not okay, he or she does not need to continually test the limits. This is why inconsistent discipline is associated with children who tease and provoke their parents. My recommendation is that parents choose limits that really matter (choose your battles) and be as consistent as possible in helping the child understand the why behind the rule. They also benefit from some help in complying with rules.

Self Control and Limits. Telling a preschooler what he cannot do is not enough to ensure compliance. What is more beneficial is to help your child learn what he or she CAN DO. For example, if Suzy is intent on jumping on the couch, instead of saying “stop that” try the following. First, honor the impulse to jump. Preschoolers should be active; their brains say “move”. The limit is *no jumping on the sofa*, so discipline that, not the jumping behavior. Parents may say “Suzie, I see you have your jumping legs going. You can’t jump on the sofa because you may get hurt. Let’s go play in the yard and play hop scotch.” This method accomplished several things. First parents avoid getting into a power struggle. Second, many young children may have great difficulty terminating an enjoyable behavior. Up to age three their brains are wired to initiate rather than terminate activity. So they need help to stop one behavior and transition to a new activity. In the second scenario, the parent actively facilitates redirection to new activity. After a parent does this a time or two the child may then be able to choose jumping outside rather than inside. In other words, with practice and active coaching from parents, children learn to control their own impulses. This self-control is what discipline is all about. Educating your child with just a few words also helps them learn why the rule exists. We all comply more readily when a rule makes sense for our own well being-children do too. Get in the habit of explaining the why behind the rule (but keep the explanation brief and simple-repeat as needed).

Limits as Mastery. A child who has a sense of mastery feels a sense of power and control. They feel confident and efficacious. Children who have a sense of mastery persevere in tasks and are motivated to figure things out. Positive discipline and limit setting are the foundations of mastery in children. A child who is emotionally secure and can regulate drives and impulses feels mastery within themselves. This is then launched in the classroom and in relationships. Sometimes working parents feel guilty about setting limits. They have so little

time with their child to begin with that they don't want to be the heavy with the little time they have with their youngster. But this is what children crave. Certainly there not need to be too many limits- kids should be allowed some freedom to be kids. However there must be restrictions on rudeness or physical acting out (like biting or hitting). Regular routines (like bed and meal times) and rituals such as books and bath before bedtime are how children first perceive that there is order in their environment. These routines go hand and hand with limits on behavior. While limit setting and maintaining a predictable routine is a challenge for many parents these measures will ensure that your child has the best start possible in life.