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The Art of Setting Limits

A Guide for Parents



About CPI

CPI provides training in crisis prevention and intervention to educators and other human service professionals. Since 1980, more than 10 million people throughout the world have participated in CPI's Nonviolent Crisis Intervention® training program, which teaches proven techniques to effectively manage disruptive and assaultive behavior.

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The Art of Setting Limits

A Guide for Parents

Setting limits is one of the cornerstones of CPI's program. Countless educators and human service professionals have benefited from CPI's highly effective approach to limit setting. This guide explains how parents can use these same skills and techniques when dealing with their own children.



You will learn:

- ☑ The difference between **setting a limit** and **issuing an ultimatum**.
- ☑ The importance of using **logic—not emotion**—when dealing with misbehavior.
- ☑ Why **kids actually prefer** it when parents impose **limits** on their behavior.
- ☑ A **proven five-step approach to setting limits** . . . and much more!

The Art of Setting Limits

Self-Assessment

Here's a quick way to check how much you know about setting limits with your children. Answer the following questions:

1. The main purpose of discipline is:

- a. To punish my child for wrongdoing.
- b. To teach my child how to make good decisions.
- c. To vent my anger and frustration with my child.

2. What is the difference between setting limits and issuing threats?

3. What does it mean to set a limit with a child?

4. What is a logical consequence?

5. Why, as parents, do we often go back to “punishment” instead of setting limits and using logical consequences?

- a. Punishment is easier.
- b. When angry, frightened, or hurt, it is our first reaction.
- c. Punishment works in the short term.
- d. All of the above.

6. On a scale of 1 to 10, how effective do you think you are at setting limits with your child?

(1 = not effective at all; 10 = extremely effective)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



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Dealing With Children's Misbehavior

When we, as parents, are faced with undesirable behavior from our children, we have to make a decision about how to respond to that behavior. Often we are angry, hurt, or frightened by something our children have done. As a result, we may allow emotion, rather than logic, to control our response.

It is much easier to punish than to think of logical consequences connected to our children's behavior. Punishment works in the short term. It stops the undesirable behavior. In the long run, however, punishment tends to foster resentment in children, especially during the teen years. This resentment can result in retaliation that may be more difficult to manage than the original misbehavior.

What Limits Are and Why They're Important

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Setting limits is an alternative to threats and punishment. It is one of the most powerful tools that parents have for providing positive discipline for their children.

Knowing that there are limits on their behavior helps kids feel safe. There are many ways to go about setting limits, but parents who use these techniques must know three things:

- **Setting a limit is not the same as issuing an ultimatum.**

Limits aren't threats. "If you don't clean up your room, you'll be grounded for the weekend."

Limits offer choices with consequences. "If you clean up your room, you can go out with your friends this evening. If you don't clean up your room, then you won't be allowed to go out with your friends. It's your decision."

- **The purpose of limits is to teach, not to punish.**

Through limits, children begin to understand that their actions, positive or negative, result in predictable consequences. By giving children choices and consequences, parents provide a structure for good decision making.

- **Setting limits is more about listening than talking.**

Taking the time to really listen to your children helps you better understand their thoughts and feelings. By listening to your children, you learn more about what's important to them, and that helps you set more meaningful limits.





CPI's Five-Step Approach to Setting Limits

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Here's a five-step approach to limit setting that will increase your effectiveness in using this technique:

1. Explain which behavior is inappropriate.

Saying "Stop that" may not be enough. Your child may not know if you are objecting to how loud he is talking, or objecting to the language that he is using. Be specific.

2. Explain why the behavior is inappropriate.

Again, don't assume your child knows why her behavior is not acceptable. Is she disturbing others? Being disrespectful? Not doing a task you asked her to do?

3. Give reasonable choices with consequences.

Instead of issuing an ultimatum ("Do this or else"), tell your child what his choices are and what the consequences of those choices will be.

Ultimatums often lead to power struggles because your child does not want to be forced to do something. By providing choices with consequences, you are admitting that you cannot force his decision. But you can determine what the consequences for his choices will be.

Consequences that logically follow from your child's actions usually work best as a teaching tool. For example, let's say that in an angry moment, your child chooses to break something. A logical consequence would be that your child has to pay for the item out of his allowance. Grounding him would not be as logical a consequence.

4. Allow time.

Generally, it's best to allow your child a few moments to make her decision. Remember that if she's upset, she may not be thinking clearly. It may take longer for her to think through what you've said to her.

5. Be prepared to enforce your consequences, even when it's inconvenient.

Limit setting is meaningless if you don't **consistently** enforce the consequences you've set. For that reason, it's important to set consequences that are reasonable and enforceable.

Before you set a consequence such as taking away television privileges for a month, think about how willing you will be to enforce that consequence. Don't back yourself into a corner.

Limits are a powerful tool for teaching children appropriate behavior. Their purpose is not to show who's boss, but to give children respect, guidance, and a feeling of security.



The Art of Setting Limits

Post-Test

Now check to see how much you've learned:

- 1. What is the purpose of setting limits with your child?**
- 2. What is the difference between a limit and an ultimatum?**
- 3. What are the five steps in CPI's approach to setting limits?**
- 4. What is a logical consequence?**
- 5. Why does your child need some time to make a decision after you present choices and consequences?**
- 6. Why is it important to enforce consequences every time you set them?**

The Art of Setting Limits

Post-Test Answers

1. The goal is to teach, NOT to punish. Limits also help your child feel safe by knowing there are boundaries for her behavior.
2. Ultimatums sound like threats and often lead to power struggles. Limits offer choices with consequences.
3. The five steps are:
 - a. Explain which behavior is inappropriate.
 - b. Explain why the behavior is inappropriate.
 - c. Give reasonable choices with consequences.
 - d. Allow time.
 - e. Enforce the consequences you have set.
4. A logical consequence is one that is related to the choice taken by your child (for example, having him pay for something that he has broken instead of taking away his television privileges).
5. When your child is upset, it may take longer for her to think through what you have said.
6. If you're not consistent with consequences, your limits will become meaningless. Your child will know that you're unlikely to follow through.





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