

Children Need Clear Boundaries and Consequences

by Julia West

“They throw all their food under the table instead of eating it and yesterday they took the legs off the play table that I had gotten for them.”

The voice on the phone was Sarah’s again, only this time she was telling me that she was ready to admit defeat and wished she’d never had any children at all. She went on, “I’m afraid to set boundaries because I’m afraid then that I’ll have to enforce them and I just don’t believe in being violent. I was punished a lot as a child and I don’t want to treat my children like that. But what can I do? I can tell you that love doesn’t work!”

Often in my counseling with parents of children of all ages, everyday boundaries have not been set for the very reasons that Sarah was now giving me. It is the ultimate paradox of childhood that children want to be controlled but insist that the parent(s) *earn* the right to control them.

Likewise, the ultimate paradox of parenthood is that if you love your children, you will fearlessly discipline them. However, the fear of inappropriate discipline is sometimes so overwhelming that it prevents many well-meaning parents from teaching their children about life’s boundaries.

When Sarah’s children ran and hid in the racks of clothes at the shopping mall, they still got their ice cream treat before they went home. Why? Because they “always had a treat then” and besides, how could she refuse when they would have temper tantrums in public and embarrass her?

Wanting to love their child but not knowing what kind of boundaries to set or how to enforce them puts parents in a position of “hopeful discipline.” That’s when they think that maybe love and understanding will overcome all problems and if not, then they hope they’ll do and say the right thing when their child gets out of control.

Sarah represents this kind of hopeful thinking, but mostly she represents the large number of parents who don’t know what kind of boundaries could or should be set, or how to enforce them. It is not because they are stupid or don’t care or won’t. It’s because they don’t know and, therefore, can’t.

Sarah’s children were out of line because boundaries had not been made clear to them, but mostly because she didn’t know how and when to enforce them. Trips to the mall became more fun for all when she announced to the children before they entered the mall (1) what was acceptable behavior, and (2) that when they were ready to go home they would have their treat only if they had followed the guidelines for acceptable behavior.

I encouraged her to have her own treat regardless of their behavior so they could see that their actions had no power over her enjoyment, and to remind them that they could also be having a treat if they had behaved appropriately. She could also remind them that she was sure they would remember next time to behave the right way in the mall.

Deciding and announcing safe limits to them, she was able to learn to follow through by rewarding appropriate behavior in various ways and to withhold rewards for unacceptable behavior. She didn’t win all the time, but then neither did the children. As she later said,

“balancing some of the boundaries for all of us made me feel like I was a more balanced Mom.”

Children need boundaries on their behavior in order to grow safely, to be loved, and to feel loved. Parents need boundaries on their own time and energy in order to enjoy their children, and still respect themselves and meet their own needs.

- First of all, it is important for parents to know that **boundaries are not meant to be permanent**. They need to be changed. They can be expanded as the child grows in levels of responsibility. Parents and children often get themselves into difficult situations by enlarging boundaries too soon, or not soon enough. Four-year-olds are generally not capable of riding their bikes safely in traffic. Teenagers are generally furious at being treated like incompetent four-year-olds.
- If not aware, parents often **use the child’s age instead of capabilities, and level of responsibility, as boundary markers**. Again, boundaries set for one child may not be appropriate for another child. How often we hear the wailing complaint, “But you let them do it! Why do you pick on me?” or, “I’m old enough, don’t you trust me?”
- Boundaries have nothing to do with trust or love or “the majority rules.” **Boundaries are clearly marked lines of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors**. Balancing boundaries means that children need to know how far they can go before their behavior is unacceptable, and parents need to know how far their time, energy, and patience will stretch before their children’s behavior becomes intolerable.
- **It is necessary that parents let the child know their own boundaries of time and energy, how far they can go, and exactly what the consequences will be**. This builds recognition and awareness of other people’s needs. For example, when Mom is tired, it’s all right for her to tell them that (1) she is tired, (2) now is the time to play quietly, and (3) if they do behave instead of yell, tease, or fight, then there will be dessert after supper and/or television before bedtime.
- **As needs change, boundaries must be clearly redefined**. As with the tired Mom, sometimes these boundaries of time and energy change daily. There must be no misunderstandings or surprises. If boundaries are going to work effectively and make for happier lives, then they must be known in advance. What parents mean when they say, “I can help you this time but I can’t keep on doing this” is that they are describing very clearly their personal boundaries and limitations. The child then knows exactly what they’re saying.
- After all, you can’t play the game unless you know the rules. Sadly, **unspoken rules are usually the set-up for many problems**.
- In order to enforce boundaries, **decide what is important to your child to use as an incentive**. It is easier and more constructive to encourage children to stay within the boundary of acceptable behavior by giving them incentives than it is to threaten them with punishment.

- Be sure to **give your child a reason for obeying** you rather than simply the fact that you said so.

Julia West, mother of eight, was a counselor at Family Resources Inc. when she wrote this article for the Birth To Three column in The Register-Guard.