

Setting Limits: Reasons Why it is Important to Set Limits with Kids

Establish Guidelines with Healthy Discipline

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Setting limits with kids means setting a guideline for behavior—even when there's not an official household rule. Since you can't set a rule about everything, limits are those spur of the moment guidelines that are situational.

You might not have an official rule that says, "No banging spoons on the table," you might need to say to your child, "Stop banging your spoon please," if he's interrupting your dinner.

Setting limits can be tough for several reasons. Sometimes parents feel guilty about saying no. Or, they want to avoid a temper tantrum that will surely erupt when a child is told it's time to leave. And of course, partners don't always agree on what limits to set with kids.

But limits are good for kids. It teaches them appropriate behavior and gives them opportunities to sharpen some of their skills.

1 Limits Teach Kids Self-Discipline

Setting limits teaches self-discipline skills. When you say, "It's time to turn off your video game and do your homework," you are teaching self-discipline. Even though video games may be more fun, it's important to be responsible.

The eventual goal is for kids to learn to manage all their responsibilities, like homework, chores and taking care of their bodies, without reminders.

Help your child develop strategies that will impose limits on himself. Tell a young child to "beat the timer" when he's getting dressed in the morning and set a timer for five minutes. Or, tell an older child she can watch TV as soon as she gets all of her homework done.

2 Limits Keep Kids Safe

Limits teach kids how to keep themselves safe. Although it might be safe for your child to play outside, he might need limits about what he's allowed to do or where he's allowed to go when he's playing outside alone.

Limits also keep kids safe when they are using the internet and when they begin doing activities independently. Limits should expand as your child matures.

Give your child opportunities to show you that he can be responsible with the limits you've given him. If he's able to handle the limits you've set, he can show that he's ready to handle more responsibility.

Create behavior management contracts to help your child understand concrete ways you'll recognize when he needs fewer limits.

3 Limits Keep Kids Healthy

By nature, most kids are impulsive and enjoy immediate gratification. Therefore, they need adults to teach them how to be healthy.

Limits should be set with a child's eating habits, for example. Without limits, many kids would eat junk food all day. Setting limits means saying, "No, you can't have a third cookie," or "You need to eat a healthy choice first."

Limits should also be set in regards to electronics. Many kids would be content watching TV or playing on the computer all day long.

Set limits with screen time, exercise, hygiene, and other health practices that will encourage a healthy lifestyle.

4 Limits Help Kids Cope with Uncomfortable Feelings

Sometimes parents avoid setting limits because they don't want to make their child sad or mad. But, learning how to deal with uncomfortable emotions is actually an important skill.

Just because your child is sad that he can't eat that third cookie doesn't mean you should give in. Instead, it gives you a great opportunity to teach your child about feelings and help him find healthy ways to cope with it.

Each limit you set is an opportunity for your child to practice managing his emotions. Coach his efforts as he tries to deal with frustration, anger, boredom, or sadness but don't take responsibility for cheering him up or calming him down.

Instead, teach him how to do those things for himself. Kids who know how to handle uncomfortable feelings will be better equipped for the realities of adulthood.

5 Limits Show Kids that You Care

Kids who live with few or no rules, experience anxiety. Kids don't want to be in charge. They want to know that you're in charge and that you're competent to help them stay in control.

Often, kids test limits just to see how adults will react. A child who hits his brother might feel relieved when his mother steps in. Or a child who jumps on the couch after you've told him to stop might be testing your leadership skills.

Giving negative consequences for breaking the rules, shows that you are not going to let things get out of control.

It also teaches a child that you love him. Saying to a teen, "I care about you and that's why I am giving you a curfew," might annoy your child on the surface.

But, it shows that you are willing to work invest energy into your child's life even if it means having to tolerate hearing "you're the meanest parent ever."