

Set firm, clear limits but allow kids choices, too

Birth To Three Column

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ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, Sigmund Freud confirmed everyone's worst fears: Yes, human beings were voracious bundles of desires, ready to devour the world.

Society had to instill a strong superego, a conscience to hold the id's desires in check. The job fell to authoritarian parents. The children produced obediently took their places on the assembly lines of industrializing nations.

However, later theorists like Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow insisted that human beings also have inborn tendencies toward altruism and cooperation. Rather than subduing a monster with authoritarian rules, parents could see themselves as "gardeners," providing the right conditions for the unfolding of each child's inborn potential.

Expectations also have changed in the work world. Today's workers are asked more often to be part of idea-generating teams and to work cooperatively than to be assembly line workers. They must be creative and flexible enough to retool their skills for many job changes in a career. Obedient rule-following no longer insures survival.

However, some worried that the more "permissive" childrearing espoused by theorists like Dr. Spock led to a generation which could not conform to any limits.

Set limits...

Parents need to strike a balance between setting limits and allowing choices. Authoritarian parents who must prove that they are boss and do not allow their children choices stifle creativity. But overly permissive parents who do not set limits produce children unable to cooperate with other people and to respect boundaries and follow rules.

I've seen children afraid to choose a toy for fear of being yelled at for doing the wrong thing. I've also seen children running in the streets, not wearing bicycle helmets when riding their bikes, and playing with firecrackers because parents were unable to set limits and stick to them. Setting limits is a way of caring as much as giving a child some power over decision making.

If you want your child to grow up able to negotiate and cooperate, you've got to teach those behaviors now: "I do lots of things for you. If you won't do what I need, then I won't feel as good about helping you when you want something."

Here's a list of some simple limits I enforce with my child:

1. You must always sit in a car seat or use a seat belt.
2. You must cooperate with diaper changing and dressing.
3. Food stays on the table.

4. You never lock doors on Mom. This is not a game.
5. No turning switches, lights, or motors on and off. It breaks them.
6. You must take a nap or have quiet time. Mom needs her own nap or quiet time.
7. When I am on the phone, I am not to be bothered.
8. Other people are not to be hurt.
9. Healthful food must be chosen as well as sweet things.
10. Toys and objects must be used for their purpose.
11. You must go to day care. Mom has to work.
12. You always wear a bicycle helmet when riding.

Your list of limits may not be the same as mine. And it will change as your child gets older. It should include the things that are really essential to you as a parent, not rules for the sake of rules, but things that really matter to you as a parent, according to your values. These are the non-negotiables, the rules of the house. If you start from day one, you will avoid many power struggles later.

In the early years, you are simply teaching. Interrupt behavior outside the limits and simply redirect it in the right direction and state the rule, short and sweet: "We always wear a seat belt. We can't go until it's on. It's my job to make sure you don't get hurt. It's also part of the law."

You may sometimes have to use some adult power to hold the line. I don't mean physical violence with its accompanying verbal humiliations. But sometimes you may have to fasten the seat belt over a screaming child: "I'm sorry, but we have to go. This is not a choice. You have to wear a seat belt "

Or use a short time out (one minute for each year of age) for a child who is hitting or not listening: "You need to sit down and think about what you're doing. It's important to listen when Dad talks." Always show that you empathize with the child's feelings and give reasons for the limit.

And, if you can't remove your child from the situation, take a "time out" yourself. Given that the child is safe where he or she is, just go in another room, sit in your favorite chair, and take some time for deep breathing.

Give choices, too

Then, within the limits, give your child as much freedom and power as you can. Children are really very powerless beings. Wherever you can give your child some choice over what happens to him or her, do so. You want your child to grow up feeling powerful, not over-powered.

Find what your limits are, your boundaries, and enforce them. Then, within that, be as flexible as you can. So, in my family, yes, food stays on the table, but it's not important to me that my child sits until everyone is finished eating. It's okay to come and go.

With infants and toddlers, let them choose between two alternatives: "Do you want

apples or pears?"

With preschoolers, you can turn almost anything into a choice-with in-limits: "We have to go now. Do you want to walk or do you want me to carry you?" "We've got to wash your hair. Do you want to get in the bathtub or do you want to bend over the sink?"

By the time your child is six, if you've been teaching him or her to make choices all along, you can say, "Go choose the clothes you want to wear." "I just want you to know that if you go barefoot, you may get sore toes. It's your choice. What do you want to do?"

If your child does what you ask, reinforce it: "Thanks for helping me."

Parents set limits for reasons of health and safety, and to protect their own limits, not because they're "the boss." But, within those limits, they can treat children as persons with rights and dignity.

For instance, as a parent, you set the limit on TV watching: "You can watch for one hour. Then it's time to play outside." However, if a child is watching TV and a parent walks in and changes the channel without a word, the child is being treated as a person without rights, an unnecessary insult to self-esteem. Better to teach negotiation: "You've been watching for a long time. Now I'd like to watch my show. When this is over, it's my turn. What can I do to make that easier for you? How about if you play with this?"

You want your child to grow up confident in his or her capacity to make choices. With careful teaching now, by the time he or she is six, you'll be able to have the 'following interaction: "Do you want your M & Ms now or do you want to save them until later?" "I think I'll save them."

Update in 2007: visit Dr. McGuire at Creative Edge Focusing™, www.cefocusing.com. You can learn Listening/Focusing skills for better communication and self-healing, join an e-discussion/support group moderated by Dr. McGuire, collaborate with us on projects related to Parenting and other issues, join our training programs for Creative Edge Focusing Consultants and Experiential Focusing Professionals. Visit Interest Area: Positive Parenting for more information on this topic.