

## The Importance of Setting Boundaries

*by Lorelei McCollough*

Children don't come with how-to manuals. Parents are often at the mercy of trial and error in regard to their parenting techniques.

Since both children and parents are individuals, these techniques must constantly be tailored and updated based on both personality and age appropriateness. But, the one compulsory parenting technique that must be present from toddler-hood to adulthood is the setting of boundaries.

Boundaries are the foundation for raising a well-mannered and confident child that will grow into a well-mannered and confident adult. The mastery of setting age appropriate boundaries will go a very long way in making family life a much happier experience for everyone.

I'm sure we've all at one time or another encountered children whose parents lacked knowledge in regard to setting boundaries . . . these children are generally rude, disrespectful and disruptive at nearly every encounter.

A great characterization of children with no boundaries would be Roald Dahl's "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory". How brilliantly he developed his ensemble of children that we given no boundaries . . . the spoiled Veruca that learned if she yelled enough she could have her way, Mike Teavee that was allowed to turn his brain to jello watching endless hours of TV, Augustus, the boy allowed every culinary indulgence that struck his fancy, and let's not forget the gum smacking Violet . . . It's almost a "how not to raise your kids guide" and the one consistent parental flaw: not setting boundaries for their children.

I remember a conversation I had once with an incredible child psychiatrist by the name of Dr. Deborah Langebacher . . . and the statement I remembered most was, "Boundaries make a child feel safe." She continued by explaining that from a child's perspective, the world was large, unpredictable, and sometimes overwhelming and boundaries were key in making their immediate world more predictable and secure.

Not setting boundaries does a great injustice to the child. If the child does not know how to behave properly, dissension will follow them wherever they go . . . at home, at school, with friends, public places, etc. . . . and children will eventually sense that many people prefer not to be around them. This can be extremely damaging to the development of their self-esteem.

In fact, ironically enough, some well-meaning parents that refuse to correct their child's inappropriate behavior do so under the mistaken premise that to correct the child would be to undermine the development of their self-esteem, when in reality just the opposite is true.

These households tend to allow inappropriate behavior to repeat over and over to the point that the parents themselves finally lose self-control and can have angry outbursts. This is confusing for the child. Why wouldn't it be? This is the fiftieth time they did this and nothing every happened, so what's the problem this time? Will the child repeat the behavior again after a parental outburst? Absolutely. Why? Because the lesson learned was sometimes mom and/or dad get really made, and that does not necessarily correlate in their minds to the behavior that was inappropriate being an

ignition switch. So, in this scenario we have both a lack of boundaries and an inconsistent, inappropriate and ineffective consequence.

When setting boundaries, it's important to keep in mind the following:

Boundaries should be reasonable, age appropriate and **always** consistent. If there is no consistency, there is no boundary. Boundaries need to be thought through, discussed and enforced jointly by both parents.

Boundaries must be clearly defined and easily understood by the child. All children will test boundaries; it's a natural part of development. So long as the boundaries stay solid and consistent, the children will eventually and usually quickly stop testing them.

When a child has crossed the boundary line, there must be a reasonable and consistent consequence. A boundary means nothing without a consequence, and let's face it, if the lesson is not taught by the loving guidance of parents, life will teach a child this lesson in a much more severe way.

Consequences should reflect the severity of the inappropriate behavior. If it's a one-time slip-up on a small offense such as interrupting, all that may be needed is a simple verbal reminder, "No, you may not interrupt." If it's more serious or habitual, then the consequence must be memorable enough that the behavior won't be repeated.

It's important to give some thought as to what your own personal selection of consequences should be for your child. Immediate removal from an activity or play date, the temporary loss of privileges, removing a toy, time outs, etc. . . . just to teach the important lesson that what they are doing is not OK and will not be tolerated. Also, consider coming up with different levels of consequences. For example, if this behavior happens it's an "x" consequence, if the behavior happens again it's a "y" consequence and so forth.

Be aware that a verbal warning will have no effect unless the inappropriate behavior has had prior consequences firmly established. (Think Pavlov.) For example, if a child has previously been removed from a birthday due to inappropriate behavior and later at another birthday party begins to exhibit inappropriate behavior, chances are that if you tell that child to stop or we'll leave, they will take you seriously and behave. On the other hand, if the child has never experienced a consequence prior, it's unlikely that a verbal warning will have any effect.

Of course, the best time to begin the use of boundaries is when children are very small around the time they are just becoming toddlers. These boundaries would be simple and primarily about safety. As the child grows, parents need to acquire new age appropriate boundaries, which should be implemented as the inappropriate behavior occurs. (Keep in mind that what may be an amusing behavior from a two-year-old, may not at all be amusing in a couple of years.)

If a child is older and has never been given boundaries, the task is more difficult and requires more attention, but is not impossible. Although beginning boundaries with older children will initially require more effort, not setting them is without a doubt the far more difficult path in the long run.

All children yearn to feel safe and know what's expected of them and giving your child the means to do this will help them have a secure and well-adjusted life — a life that can bring them positive approval from their parents, friends, teachers, and most importantly themselves.

## Quality Time and Boundaries

*by Frank McSweeney*

During parent coaching calls, one of the issues that parents ask me about is Quality Time. The vast majority of parents want to do the very best for their children. The life happens. It seems there's always something demanding our time. If it isn't work, it's paying bills, or reading the mail, or shopping, or taxiing the kids here and there. One of the big culprits in the Quality Time issue is when both parents work. For many of us it is a fact of life.

### So What is Quality Time?

I would say that Quality Time is time spent with a child where there is a true connection between parent and child. In many cases it may mean undivided attention. At the very least, for it to be Quality Time the child needs to feel connected with the parent. If Mom is reading while the child plays on the floor, I would consider it Quality Time if, when the child calls for Mom's attention to something he is doing, Mom attends and interacts. The same scenario would not be Quality Time, from my perspective, if Mom responds to the child with, "Not now, I'm reading."

### Fitting It All In

Is it hard to interact with your child in a game of T-ball, soccer, or basketball? It rarely qualifies as entertaining sport but mere presence may not be sufficient to qualify as Quality Time. Although some parents are over-involved with the child in sports, it seems that awareness and attention to the child requires that the parent watches what is happening and is aware of the child. I have seen some parents who bring the child to the game, drop her off and then are off to a power-walking session. I'm not bashing or bad-mouthing any parent. It is extremely unfair to ever judge a parent on what we observe in an isolated incident. The power-walking parent may spend a great deal of other time with the child.

### Quality Time and Self-Esteem

A parent who is "too busy" for the child and finds himself resentful that the child's activities intrude on his life may convey that message to the child. The child may feel unimportant or, at least, fairly far down on the parent's priority list. The purpose of Quality Time is to let the child know how important he is to you. This builds self-esteem and gives the child a sense of self-worth. We need more of this Quality Time when we are very young, but we need some of it all through our life. From whom that comes may differ, which is why parents of adolescents may find themselves "not needed" because now the Quality Time comes from peers.

### Is it Possible to Give Too Much Quality Time?

I'm not sure, but I believe it is possible to give the wrong message in the name of Quality Time. A parent who always drops whatever she is doing to respond to a child may give the child a warped sense of importance. If there are no boundaries about when a child can or cannot interrupt, to the point where he develops an attitude that he can interrupt at any time or in any place, the message that is received is that the child is the most important creature in the world.

### Not the Center of the Universe

Although we want our child to feel good about herself, it is inaccurate for anyone to think they're the center of the universe, the most important creature in the world. It is a false sense of self and does not serve the child well. This may seem a fine line, but the difference lies in the attitude of the parent and the boundaries that are set. The message I believe you would like to convey to your child is that she is always important but that some of the things she does are not that important or there are other more important things for you to attend to at that moment. Important is a poor word here. Sometimes just mowing the lawn takes priority.

### Phone Behavior

Parent of young children can see an example of how this can become a problem if you think of the phone ringing. What happens in your house? In some homes, Mom can't talk on the phone without constant interruptions. All of a sudden the child needs to talk to you, or show you something. The degree to which this is a problem may give you a hint as to how you have dealt with boundaries.

### Boundaries in a Family

Boundaries are an issue in family, between parents and children, between parents themselves and between children. Being able to define your own boundaries is a task for each of us and goes a long way toward making a life manageable. When you can define boundaries in an assertive (not aggressive) manner, you are able to stand up for your rights and yet not trample the rights of others. Parents who establish boundaries with their children begin to teach children about boundaries. Homes in which bedroom and bathroom doors are left open are probably not teaching boundary setting. Privacy is a boundary issue. Parents are allowed to have privacy, yet in some homes the doors always open and children can enter any time, without knocking. Intimacy becomes an issue for that parental couple.

### The Parent's Boundaries

We started talking about Quality Time and ended up talking about parental intimacy. That's not a stretch since understanding boundaries and spending appropriate quality time with your children should not preclude spending Quality Time with your spouse or significant other. Children are incredibly important but they're not the only important things in the world. You may disagree with that statement. It's your right. Just check on the limits and boundaries you set for your children, because parenting is a long-term process. It doesn't happen in an instant. Give that quality time. The children need it and you need it. Teach them to make appropriate boundaries. It will probably

be easier for them to understand "good touch, bad touch" when they understand boundaries. When you teach them boundaries, you help them in so many ways.

## Boundaries - Why Are They Needed?

*by Derek & Gail Randel*

Imagine a child who lacks ownership of his own life, has no self-control and lacks respect for others. If these were the qualities of your son, how would you feel for his future wives?

Yes, wives is plural, this is one major reason we need to set boundaries for our children - their future. One study showed that children born recently on average will have more spouses than kids. Here are a few examples of children who lack boundaries:

1. Little Johnny walks right into his parents' bedroom whenever he wants. It does not matter if the door is open or closed.
2. Twelve-year-old Steve frequently changes the channel on the television. It does not matter if anyone was watching a show or not.
3. Susie blames others for her mistakes. It always seems to be her teacher's fault, brother's fault, or a friend's fault when something does not go right.
4. Marie is uncomfortable with how her boyfriend treats her and pressures her for sex. She keeps dating him, because she questions who else would want to date her.

Without boundaries, children will have problems in relationships, school, and life. Many times, addictive behavior can be traced to lack of boundaries. Here are a few results that can occur:

1. Children can have controlling behavior.
2. Children can be motivated by guilt or anger.
3. Without firm boundaries, children are more likely to follow their peer group. For example, making unwise choices on sex, drinking or driving.
4. Children do not own their own behavior or consequences, which can lead to a life of turmoil.
5. Children may allow others to think for them.
6. They may allow someone else to define what his or her abilities will be. This denies their maximum potential.
7. When someone has weak boundaries, they pick up other's feelings.
8. Weak boundaries may make it hard to tell where we end and another person begins.

Age Appropriate Boundaries:

One to three years

Children can learn to respond to the word "no" and can understand the consequences of their disobedience - their isolation and our disapproval.

Three to five years

Children are now more able to understand the reasons for taking responsibility and what consequences are about. They can talk with you about it. Learning how to treat friends kindly, responding to authority, disagreeing while being respectful, and doing household chores are all a part of defining boundaries at this stage. Consequences, such as "time-outs" and temporary loss of privileges, such as toys, TV, or fun activities are effective at this age.

Six to eleven years

Boundary issues will revolve around balancing home life with friends, homework and school tasks and budgeting time and money. Consequences can involve restrictions on friendships, freedoms and home privileges.

Twelve to eighteen years

It is the period in which you should begin "de-parenting": moving from a position of control to one of influence with your child. You will be dismantling many of the "artificial" boundaries you may have erected for their safety during childhood. Your teenager will naturally push against and test all the boundaries in their life during this stage, and it requires wisdom and determination to stand firm: some boundaries need to be held for a little longer until they are mature enough. It helps to anticipate these challenges and actually talk about them: "When you are fourteen, you will be able to buy all your own clothes with a budget; until then, I need you to cooperate with me."

When your children are teenagers, help them with issues, such as relationships, values, scheduling, and long-term goals. Allow as many natural consequences as possible (for example, poor spending choices means having no money or supporting the discipline the school metes out).

"Freedom comes from handling responsibility well; it is not a gift bequeathed by chronological age."  
-Townsend and Cloud

Setting Boundaries:

We have all been in a situation where someone is standing too close to us and we find ourselves wanting to take a step back. Our personal space, or boundary, has been invaded. Physical boundaries protect us and help us decide how and by whom we can be touched. Emotional boundaries protect our thoughts and emotions.

How can you help your child to set healthy boundaries?

You can guide your child throughout the process of deciding when to share personal thoughts and feelings. For example, private thoughts and feelings are best shared with close friends and family members. Casual friends should talk about non-personal topics, such as sports, school and movies.

Before your child can develop healthy relationships, he or she needs to understand the importance of creating a personal "safe space". Appropriate boundaries protect your body, thoughts and feelings. When boundaries are too open, the result can be physically and emotionally dangerous. These are signs that your child's boundaries are too open:

- ♦ Shares personal information with acquaintances or strangers
- ♦ Wears tight or revealing clothing
- ♦ Stands too close to others
- ♦ Makes sexual comments about other people's body parts
- ♦ Has a tendency to believe everything people say

Perhaps your child has found out that a good friend told personal information about him or her to others. You can help your child understand that such a violation of trust is also a violation of boundaries. Tell your child that people who do not respect boundaries are not good choices for friends. Encourage your child to establish friendships slowly, sharing private thoughts and feelings gradually to ensure that trust is mutual and deserved.

## Foster Care

Boundaries are the framework within which the foster child and foster parent(s) relationship occurs. Boundaries make the relationship healthy, and safe for the child, and sets the parameters within which services are delivered and needs are met. The primary concern in establishing and managing boundaries with foster children must be in the best interests of the child. Except for behaviors of a sexual nature or obvious conflict of interest activity, boundary considerations often are not clear-cut matters of right and wrong. Rather, they are dependent upon many factors and require careful thinking through of all the issues, always keeping in mind the best interests of the child.

### Allegations

Foster parents must always be concerned about allegations of mistreatment of the child. I know people don't want to hear this or believe it, but . . . children will lie! They will manipulate, threaten and lie to get what they think they want. A foster child usually wants to go home and be back with their family. It is very important not to give the child, the natural family, or the State any ammunition. Not to mention, the pain and emotional heartache of being accused of harming a child, when you are expending so much of your time and energy to help the child, is difficult to ever get over.

A healthy and safe foster home will take  
precautions from the start.

Safe boundaries will not only protect your family but help the child heal and allow focus to be on the needs of the birth family and the future of the child.

- ♦ Don't be in a room alone with the child.

When you have a conference with the child, have a third person there. Otherwise, the child could, when he is angry and wants his way, say, "Foster Dad takes me into the bedroom every Monday night . . ." This is scary, but it happens.

It is best to meet with the child in a room other than a bedroom. I know it may be hard to find privacy, but the kitchen, dining room, picnic table in the backyard - most anywhere - is better than a bedroom.

- ♦ If you don't have a third person, **be sure to keep doors open**. A closed door can cause suspicion.
- ♦ Document or journal the parent/child conference.

This is a good way to review goals and progress. It is also a good record of attitude, problems and concerns. Document who was at the conference. Document the child's behaviors. This is important for caseworkers, therapists and court. Be specific. Be factual - this is not a journal of your feelings, "just the facts". It will usually hold up in a court of law if it is factual. Describe behaviors, not what you think he is feeling.

- Good example: Johnny came home at 2 a.m. He smelled like alcohol.
- Bad example: Johnny came home at 2 a.m. He was probably out with those awful bums, who drink and do drugs.

- ♦ Document action and discipline you have taken concerning the child's behavior.
- ♦ Don't make awkward threats - threats of violence or neglect.

Some people may believe you. Moreover, foster children will more than likely want to find out the validity of your statements.

- ♦ Keep careful records of expenditures.

Keep receipts, when possible, if this is a problematic area in your household. If the child is old enough, have him review the expenses and sign his name to prove that he is aware of where the money is spent. When giving the child money, have him sign that he has accepted the money. Teenagers, especially, like to let caseworkers and birth family think they are being taken advantage of. The money issue is very big with them.

- ♦ Report any problems or concerns quickly to your Team Coordinator, Lead Foster Parent and/or the caseworker.

It will be harder for the child or the birth family to triangulate if you and your team have open communication. This does not mean that the worker will believe your side. Stick to facts, not suppositions. Honesty and integrity are the greatest safeguards against allegations!

