Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Setting limits and letting go: creating healthy boundaries and knowing when to let go

Whether your toddler develops a keen interest in the oven, your ten-year-old wanders outside of your neighbourhood or your teenager comes home an hour after curfew: your children will always be testing the boundaries you set for them.



Making and enforcing reasonable limits is probably one of the most challenging tasks of parenting and also happens to be one of the most important. Boundaries not only protect your children and make them feel safe, but will also help them develop a sense of responsibility and self-control that will carry through the rest of their lives. By following these tips—and through lots of trial and error—you can find the right balance between keeping your kids safe and allowing them to make mistakes.

Make it specific. Establish detailed boundaries and ensure they are well-known. Some parents fail to do this and when their child does something wrong they are left wondering why. It's a good idea to create a list of house rules and display them in an obvious place. Regularly discuss and reinforce these limits and make them part of your household culture.

Lay it out. Just as important as setting boundaries is deciding what will happen if these lines are crossed. Establish consistent and reasonable consequences and apply them every time, so your child knows that you mean what you say. Make sure you, your partner and anyone who plays an active role in raising your kids present a united front when it comes to rules and penalties. Mixed messages will only make kids test the limit more often.

Set rules together. Kids will understand boundaries and the consequences of breaking them if they are a part of the process. This doesn't mean children should set all the rules, but that you should listen to their opinions and consider their input. Let your teenager, for example, borrow the car if they commit to washing it once a month and contribute to gas costs. This creates a "win-win" situation and teaches your children valuable negotiation skills. This approach is particularly helpful for adolescents, but you can also explain to young kids why they have to brush their teeth or hold your hand when they cross the street.

Lead by example. You must respect and abide by the same behaviour you ask of your children. If your kids are not allowed to enter your room without knocking, you should give them the same courtesy. If you're going to be half an hour late getting home, give your kids a call. Set a good example with your own boundaries.

Reward for the good. Although it may get lost in the shuffle, don't forget to notice, encourage and reward your child's good behaviour. Although the bad days stick out, make sure you celebrate the good ones.

Let go. The day will come when your children refuse to kiss you goodbye, start spending the night with friends or bring home their first date. It can be incredibly difficult for a parent to let go, trust kids to make good choices and to stay safe. It's hard to find a balance between loving your children and suffocating them. Giving your sons and daughters the freedom to make their own choices (and

inevitable mistakes) doesn't make you a bad or uninvolved parent. It actually means you are there even more: just in a way that allows them to experience life more fully on their own. It may be a good idea to be an occasional sleuth though, just to make sure this new trust isn't being abused.

If you've ever been met with an "I hate you" from your distraught teen or a historic temper tantrum from your two-year-old, you know how difficult setting boundaries can be. Realize that *you* are their parent and not their friend and that your limitations are bound to cause some tears. Don't go out of your way to create unnecessary limits, but don't hesitate to set necessary ones. All children will test boundaries and you can never win every battle. Remain consistent, practice what you preach and remember that setting healthy limits can go a long way in helping your children become healthy, well-adjusted individuals.

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