

Boundaries

As parents, we sometimes give in because we want to see our children smile... and sometimes we just want to avoid the tantrum. While in the short-term it may improve the situation, it can create issues in the long run. Clear and consistent limits are important in helping children feel they living in a safe and predictable environment. This allows them to focus more on learning new things rather than worrying about what will happen next. Below are some strategies that parents can practice to help set appropriate boundaries and prevent giving in.

Think Ahead

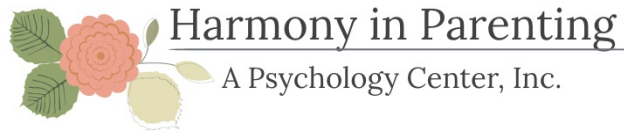
At times we are able to predict our child's wants and needs. This is important information to consider in planning what limits need to be set ahead of time. It is also important that we balance our well being (and sanity) along with what we think is best for our children.

If, for example, you are walking into the grocery store with a tired, irritable child you can expect that a tantrum will ensue when they find that special treat and are told they cannot have it. One way to plan ahead, if you are running low on your reserve, is to setup limits ahead of time. For instance, prior to going into the store you might want to say, "you can pick one snack today." This may sound permissive, but it is not. You are setting a clear boundary ahead of time. You are setting something you feel confident you can stick with. Not setting this boundary and then allowing for a snack after a tantrum ensues is giving in.

There are times where you might be caught off guard, but you do not have to respond right away. Take some time to be thoughtful in your response and consider the many factors: do I feel calm, has my child napped, is my child hungry, and what has my child's experience been like today? You can take this time by saying, "let me think about it."

Be Calm

The words that we use matter, but our tone of voice will dominate over our words. Our children are so incredibly sensitive to our emotions and can read us very well. They have been studying our facial expressions, tone of voice, and movement their entire lives. When we use a tone of voice that indicates our frustration or anger, our children can feel rejected. This sense of rejection does not always show up as tears or sadness though... it can show up as yelling, screaming, hitting, kicking, and any other aggressive or acting out behavior. Our children quickly move into a fight or flight mode when they feel threatened in some way, including a *perceived* emotional threat of rejection or abandonment. As the person that takes care of them we are incredibly important to



them and how we respond to our children is absorbed as if it is a reflection of their worth. This makes it so incredibly necessary for us to remain calm and do what is necessary to become calm when upset. This may mean stating that you need a few minutes to calm yourself down. Taking deep breaths helps much of the time and this is great time to model for your child how to regulate emotions.

In addition to being calm it is important to be understanding and loving. Our children are growing human beings with a developing brain that has not caught up to ours yet (and won't for quite some time). When we set a limit in a loving and caring tone we are reminding them that they are loved and lovable (which is really why we are setting the limit to begin with). For example, when dessert time is over and they are asking for more you can say, "I know you really love the cookies. We are done with them for today. You will get more dessert tomorrow." Through this statement you are acknowledging their desire, setting the limit, and even giving them idea of when they can expect to have their treat again.

Be Clear and Consistent

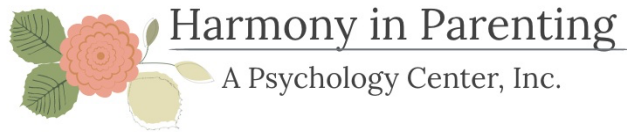
When we are setting boundaries, we need to be very clear about what we mean. When we are getting ready to leave the house and need our children to be ready, it helps to set a time limit. You can say, "When this TV episode is done, please put on your socks and shoes because we are going to the store." The second part of this is following through and saying, "Your show is done. The TV is being turned off. It's time to put on your socks and shoes."

Let go of the Guilt

Guilt may arise during this process of setting clear and consistent limits, but be careful not to respond out of guilt. Simply notice and acknowledge your feelings, while remembering that giving in does not serve them in the long-term.

Final Note

Remember that as you are setting limits it is also an opportunity to be present with your children. These are the moments that will be engraved into your child's heart and brain. Setting clear consistent limits delivered with kindness sets the stage for your child to feel safe and confident in the world.



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