



A Way of Being with Children

A Trauma-Informed Approach to Building Safety and Resilience

Building Boundaries

Exploring Effective Limit Setting with Children



Limit Setting

When setting limits, we should be aware that the child is trying to tell us something but lacks the appropriate words or actions to express how they are feeling. This helps us remember that when children misbehave or make mistakes, we can create opportunities for guidance and teaching rather than punishment.

“Too often, we forget that discipline really means to teach, not to punish. A disciple is a student, not a recipient of behavioral consequences.”

– Daniel J. Siegel

The Benefit of Setting Limits

1. **Helps children feel safe** – creates structure and clear expectations which promote a safe environment.
2. **Creates an opportunity for the child to correct his/her mistake without feeling judged** – limits enforce that a child is accepted always, they are never “bad”, but an action may not be appropriate and they have an opportunity to try a different way.
3. **Protects the environment** – items and property may not be harmed, so while we always acknowledge a child’s feelings, we remind them that we cannot accept negative behavior and teach respect for another’s property.

4. **Protects others** – people are not for hurting in any way, so using limits remind a child where their boundaries start and end and that other people have boundaries too.
5. **Protects the child** – when reflection is used, a child learns a model for setting his/her own limits with others and allows them to learn ways to set boundaries and stand up for him/herself.
6. **Protects the adult/caregiver/teacher** – limits help a child learn that an adult is not for hurting, threatening or treating disrespectfully and guides the child to learn more adaptive ways to express his/her feelings.

Limits are successful when they are:

- Reasonable
- Minimal (only used when needed)
- Kind
- Firm
- Consistent
- Neutral (not emotionally charged)
- Comfortable



Establishing Limit Setting with “ACT”

Acknowledge the feeling. **Communicate the limit.** **Target an alternative.**

Acknowledge the feeling – you hear the child and want them to know their feeling is valid and recognized.

Communicate the limit – a matter-of-fact, without judgement, firm, calm limit that is reasonable and consistent.

Target an alternative – identifying another action that is safe for the child to express their emotion so that he/she has an opportunity to learn other ways to communicate their feelings or wants.

1. “You seem really mad. I am not for hurting. You can hit the play dough.”
2. “You seem frustrated. Chairs and tables are not for climbing on. You can run and jump outside.”
3. “You seem angry. Your sister’s hair is not for pulling. You can say, “please can I have a turn.””

Choices and Consequences

When limit setting isn’t effective, empower the relationship with choices. Choices provide an opportunity for a child to problem-solve and take responsibility for his/her own actions. This is an important life lesson – decisions come with natural consequences. There are no right/wrong, good/bad decisions, but rather two alternatives and corresponding results that follow. It is suggested to start with limit setting, always trying it twice, before moving on to choices should the child refuse to accept the limit. This places the locus of control on the child.

Choice A – Consequence A. Choice B – Consequence B.

Remember to provide age-appropriate time for the child to think, problem-solve and make his/her choice. It’s might be a challenge in the beginning, but consistency and follow through are key to choices being effective. It’s also important to reinforce that the child is not in a “time out”, this suggests a punishment approach, but rather that he/she chose not to participate. This places responsibility of the choice on the child and removes judgement regarding his/her decision.

ACT and Choices in Action: Example

A young child wants to go down a slide head first. You would start with setting a limit using ACT.

A – Acknowledge the feeling.

“It is fun to go down the slide head first.”

C – Communicate the limit.

“But it’s not safe on this slide.”

T – Target an alternative.

“You may go down feet first.”

If the child refuses to accept the limit, you can then move on to providing a choice.

Choices allow the child to assume responsibility for the decision made and the subsequent consequence.

Having the ability to problem-solve the choice promotes the much needed life-long skill of thinking before acting. Remember to be calm, empathetic and caring, choices are tough, while also remaining firm and non-judgemental.

Choice A – “If you choose to go down the slide feet first”

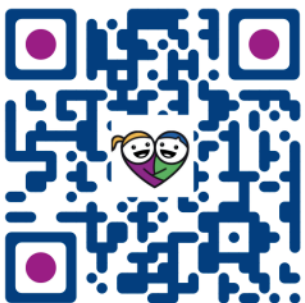
Consequence A – “you choose to use the slide.”

Choice B – “if you choose to go down the slide head first”

Consequence B – “you choose not to use the slide.”

Time to problem solve – “You can choose.”

You can reflect on the child’s experience: “you chose to go down feet first and keep using the slide”; “you’re proud of your choice”; “you did it”. OR “You don’t like the choice you made”; “you wish you had made a different choice”; “you’re mad you went head first and now your time on the slide is finished”; “maybe next time you will make a different choice”.



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