



Therapy for Children

Limit Setting

Understanding what limit setting means

Babies behave as they do to get their needs met. For example, when they cry they're trying to tell you that they need something – maybe they're hungry, need their nappy changed or feel tired. All they are doing is trying to express their likes and dislikes in the only way they can. All toddlers test limits and have tantrums. Research shows that a child's brain is still developing during this period so there are limits to how much they're able to control their emotions. Remember that behaviour in toddlers which is often seen as naughty is actually quite normal and part of growing up. School age children are constantly learning and exploring their world. They may have lots of questions as they start to form their own views on issues. As they move towards being more independent they may seem to push boundaries and become more challenging, a necessary part of growing up

All children need love, guidance and to have rules and boundaries. Rules and boundaries help families to understand how to behave towards each other, and what's OK and not OK. But the best way to go about this will vary based on your child's age and stage of development. All children are different and develop and reach milestones at different rates.

Understanding what limit setting needs

Positive parenting uses techniques that work well for every child. These techniques build on your child's wish to please you, the importance of listening, and, above all, loving your child – leading to a better-behaved, happy child and less-stressed parents.

There is much written about why and how to help children develop the self control and also nurture their innate desire to be able to meet the sensible expectations that caring, thoughtful adults present them with. As we all know, this can be far easier said than done. We now share some ideas from some experts in the field of children's behaviour

Top Tips for parents to help with limit setting

- Keep guidance simple and consistent.
- If your child is behaving in a way you don't want them to, clearly explain what you want them to do instead.
- Be available and make time so your child will come to you when they feel something is wrong or they are upset.
- Keep talking and listening to your child even if at times it feels like a challenge. Start listening from a very early age and set a pattern for life.

- Review family rules as your child gets older and recognise the different needs of children living at home. For example, you shouldn't expect the same from your 12 year-old as you would from your four year-old.
- Get support from friends and try any good ideas they have found helpful.
- Praise children, even for the little things they do.
- Reward positive behaviour and consider asking what would be a good reward.
- Avoid making rash decisions when you're angry.
- Take time to really listen to what your children are saying and explain to them what you are feeling.
- Be a role model and don't do things that you wouldn't want your children to do

Keep your cool

- ❖ Accept support. Knowing that there are other parents in the same situation can be a great encouragement
- ❖ Make time for yourself. If you live with a partner, agree a way to make sure you both get time off.
- ❖ Get help This is a positive step to take and not a sign of weakness.
- ❖ Be as prepared as possible. All children will be stressful at times so consider ways of dealing with this in advance.
- ❖ Don't overlook success If you have coped well with something difficult, be proud of what you've achieved.

Building positive relationships

- ✚ Show your child you're interested in what they like. Think of enjoyable activities you can do together.
- ✚ Think of times when you have seen a positive change in your child's behaviour and anything you could learn from that experience.
- ✚ Ask your child for their views and be willing to listen. This can help you to see things from their view.
- ✚ Don't give up or be too hard on yourself if things don't immediately change. Focus on small steps and achievable goals.
- ✚ Be prepared to compromise and admit you're wrong.

(Adapted from "Positive parenting" guidance by The NSPCC)

Why and How to set limits effectively

CONSISTENT LIMITS → PREDICTABLE, SAFE ENVIRONMENT → SENSE OF SECURITY

Providing children with consistent limits helps them feel safe and secure. Doing it well limits children's undesirable behaviour and teaches them self-control and responsibility for their own behaviour by allowing them to experience the consequences of their choices and decisions.

Limit setting helps children practice self-control and begin to learn to stop themselves in the real world. Limits are set only when the need arises. Ask yourself:

- + “Is this limit necessary?”
- + “Can I consistently maintain this limit?”
- + “If I don’t set a limit on this behaviour, can I consistently allow this behaviour and accept my child?”

Use the ‘Three Step A-C-T Method of Limit Setting’:

+ **A**cknowledge the feeling

+ **C**ommunicate the limit

+ **T**arget alternatives

Here is how it looks.....

- + **A**cknowledge your child’s feeling or desire (your voice must convey empathy and understanding).
“I know that you think that it would be fun to... tip your pop/not get ready for school/carry on playing with your Xbox” etc. Your child learns that his feelings, desires, and wishes are valid and accepted by you (but not all behaviour). Just empathically reflecting your child’s feeling often defuses the intensity of the feeling or need.
- + **C**ommunicate the limit (be specific and clear—and brief).
“butthe pop is not for tipping/it’s time to get ready/ you need to stop so you can have food” etc
- + **T**arget acceptable alternatives (provide one or more choices, depending on age of child).
“You can tip water out in the sink/ carry on doing that after” etc
The goal is to provide your child with an acceptable outlet for expressing the feeling or the original action, while giving him an opportunity to exercise self-control.

(Adapted from Child Parent Relationship Therapy (CPRT) by Bratton, Landreth, Kellam, & Blackard.)

Using PACE

Children can struggle to submit to adult expectations if they have not had the opportunity, for whatever reason, to develop a trusting and close relationship with that person. This can lead them to oppose parental influence and develop controlling behaviours, and create a story for themselves of how they feel they ought to behave, a story that is unhelpful and it prevents them being open to trust, guidance and comfort. The root of this problem can come from a lack of the feeling of safety which begins in the very early relationship between them and their primary caregiver. A lack of bonding can result in attachment problems (see Attachment section of booklet), which can lead children to struggle to feel they can trust their parents, that they won’t be able to comfort them. Resistance to limit setting can often become habitual as a coping mechanism, frequently of anger also. Children who have not

experienced sufficient closeness with their parent early on, often called co-regulation, can feel that anger will protect them from the desire to be comforted.

We therefore need to help change their story, by experiencing the qualities that are within them that are delightful, and help them and their parents see that too. Eyes and ears may have stopped looking and listening. Reasoning doesn't work. Once a child begins to actually experience and rediscover the bits of themselves that are likeable, joyful, funny, kind and 'good', through the way that we respond that notices, facilitates and reflects this, they can start to create a better self story in which they are 'good', not 'bad'. This allows them to begin to trust again, permit comfort, let go of the need to control. There is now less at stake and a reduction in aggression will follow. When we help the child to carry and contain the emotional struggle within him we are providing him with the safety needed to explore, resolve, and integrate the experience. This is hard for adults. It means we have to learn to like them again, and remain open to them, even when we ourselves feel afraid, hurt, vulnerable, guilty or unsure. The more we do this, the easier it will become. We must begin with ourselves and it takes time, there is no easy fix. We cannot react unhelpfully or give up.

We can use **PACE** to aid this process:

Playful: Light, relaxed, exaggerated (affect/cognition), smile, do unexpected. Playfulness conveys a sense of hopefulness and generates a forward energy. Playfulness is not used as an effort to pull a person out of a negative emotional state.

Accepting: Of thoughts, feelings, beliefs, wishes, memories, perceptions of behavioural events; non-judgmental, unconditional regard (only behaviour may be evaluated)

Curious: Not-knowing, open, interested, act of discovery, surprise, "aha!", never evaluated.

Empathetic: Feeling-felt, joined, in the world of the other. Giving expression to affect vitality

These factors provide the momentum for changing the responses that children can get stuck in and help them re-experience themselves to feel accepted, understood, and integrated.

(Adapted from Dan Hughes, Golding and Hudson (2018) - Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP))

Consistency is key

Control is a fear based behaviour and it is saying "I can't trust adults to be in charge yet". Children benefit from routine, it enables them to predict important everyday events such as mealtimes, sleep times and going to school. Parents need to establish themselves as the 'unassailable safe base'. This means we are consistent in saying what we mean and doing what we say. We stick to what we know needs to be done without being distracted by or children's attempts to control us. Children need us to be in control. They can only bully or control us if we allow them to.

(Adapted from "The a-z of Therapeutic Parenting" by Sarah Naish (2018))