

## **Tips and Tricks for Setting Effective Limits with Children**

Provided by Michelle Lockwood, Director of Positive Behavior Support Services, NJCIE  
 Email: [michellelockwood@njcie.net](mailto:michellelockwood@njcie.net)

### **Make Your Expectations, Rules, and Consequences Clear**

- State rules clearly and keep rules to a minimum, so children can remember them.
- Be specific about what children are being asked to accomplish. Telling a child that a special activity will be earned if he or she has been "on task" only invites arguments. The child will inevitably claim that he/she was trying to finish.
- Establish guidelines using impersonal, measurable criteria. Timers that ding to signal an end of an activity, for example, are easier for some children to respond to than an adult telling them to stop.
- Model the appropriate response for the children at every opportunity. Discuss your behavior as well as the child's positive steps toward self-control at regular times each day. While it does not produce instant changes in behavior, this is a powerful tool of instruction when used consistently.

### **Use Enforceable Statements**

- Say what you are going to do, not what you think the child should do.
- Only speak from your perspective because you are the only one you can control.
- Make sure you can actually enforce the statement you are making.

### **Give Choices**

Kids who have parents who make all decisions for them don't learn how to make their own decisions. Then, when they need to make a decision, they make it not based on what is right but on who is going to find out, how that person will react, and how they can hide it from that person. The question we want our children to ask themselves is "How is the next decision I make going to affect me?". Some tips for using choices include:

- Give as many choices as you can while the price tag is small so you can gain control when the stakes are higher.
- Allow a child to have the power to gain access to the things that are important to him/her. They will choose the most important things to them. Don't choose for them.
- Talk about things your child likes to do and explain exactly what you need to see from him/her in order to gain access to those things (this happens when a misbehavior has occurred).
- When giving choices, begin with phrases like:
  - "What would be best for you..."
  - "Would you rather..."
  - "Feel free to..."
  - "You can either..."
- Give children choices before problem behavior begins. The fact that they have choices should be a constant topic of each conversation concerning behavior. An example might be "I see that this homework is taking longer than you had hoped. You may choose to finish it now or you may take a quick snack break now and then complete it."
- Never give a choice only after they have argued with your original decision. This shows the child that they can manipulate you.
- Speak and retreat--Don't hang around for what could turn into an argument. Offer a choice and then allow the child time to consider the options and make the choice.

### **Remember the Difference--Consequences Vs. Punishment**

Parents have a choice in how to deal with any situation. They can rant and rave, give in and take away the child's problem, or they can allow the consequences to sink in, which will in turn create a life-long lesson. Consequences expressed with empathy will place a child in the thinking/decision-making mode and the problem will become the bad guy, not the parent. Punishment usually elicits an

emotional response, a desire on the part of the child to become sneaky rather than more responsible, and the parent becomes the bad guy, not the problem.

### **Make Consequences Reasonable and Enforceable**

As closely as possible, have the punishment fit the crime. Sitting in a chair in the corner for being off task doesn't make as much sense as missing part of a special activity while completing the task. Teaching children that their behavior is under their control and that consequences are the result of *their own* behavior is a difficult part of the process. A child who cleans his room as directed can be told, "You have chosen to get your room cleaned even though you felt like playing outside. Now you have time for a special activity. Aren't you glad that you decided to use your time wisely today?" Don't promise rewards or non-preferred consequences/punishments that are not possible.

### **Be Consistent**

Be as good as your word. If three incidents of teasing with a sibling during an activity means the child must go to their room to think about their behavior for 3 minutes, then stick to it. Don't get mad and send the child to their room after two incidents. Don't let six go by before responding. Don't worry. If the child is fortunate enough to make a poor choice, he/she may have a double learning opportunity.

### **Watch Your Delivery**

When setting limits and issuing consequence, try to be firm, but calm, and matter-of-fact. Setting limits does not have to be done in an angry, rude or hostile way. Firmness does not mean intimidation. Remember to smile! Consequences said with a smile are much easier to swallow. In other words, say what you mean; mean what you say, but don't be mean when you say it.

### **Review the Process and Refine**

- Did I tell the child *in advance* what behavior I want?
- Was my expectation/desired behavior clear?
- If I can't get the child to complete the task, have I tried breaking it into smaller steps to make it clearer?
- Have I tried letting the child see someone else perform the desired behavior?
- Did I tell the child *in advance* what the consequences of his act would be?
- Did I make any "deadlines"/consequences clear?
- Did I mean what I said?
- Have I tried helping the child remember by using signals or cues (verbal, visual, etc.)?
- Did I give a direction instead of make a request? He might think it's okay to say no to "Will you do this now?"
- Did I make the "good"/desired behavior pay off?
- Was the "payoff" something the child cared about/liked?
- Did I give the "payoff" immediately after the given behavior?
- If I can't get the desired behavior, have I tried breaking it into smaller steps and rewarding small successes?
- Did I make the problem behavior cost?
- Did I deliver the "cost"/consequence immediately after the given behavior?
- Was the cost really something the child did NOT like?
- Could I be getting problem behavior because I have let this type of behavior "pay off" in the past?
- Am I giving up too soon?