



Setting Rules and Limits

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Parents sometimes are not clear about what they expect of their children. Youth who stay away from risky behaviors tend to have parents who set clear limits for behavior, including rules about homework, television use, curfew, drugs, and alcohol.

While these parents may appear to be more strict than other parents, they are not harsh. These parents make it clear that they love their children, but they also are very clear about how they expect their children to behave. They help their children learn acceptable ways to act.

Setting limits is saying “I love you.”

- Setting limits is a way of expressing love for our children. It's the most important message we can give them, and it's the message they most want to hear — I love YOU!
- Setting limits is a way of showing our concerns for their physical and emotional safety. When children and teens know that the rules are made to protect them, they feel cared for.

Children and teens really want to please their parents.

- They want their parents' approval, and they will work hard to please them when they feel loved and respected.

Children in the middle years — 6 through 12 — are very concerned about justice and fair play.

- They expect to have rules and directions, and they understand appropriate penalties for not following them.
- This is an ideal time to begin providing simple and brief explanations about decisions and letting children express their feelings about

these decisions. Keep in mind that reasoning powers are just beginning to develop for 6 to 12-year-olds, and their reactions may not be very logical. But it is important at all ages to recognize their efforts and to encourage continued development.

- To help children learn about rules the following steps may be helpful:
 1. Identify what is expected.
 2. Tell the children what is expected as a rule.
 3. Say the rule in a positive way.
 4. Give the children examples of the rule.
 5. Help the children practice the behavior.
 6. Explain what will happen if the children follow the rule and what will happen if the children do not follow the rule.
 7. If children do not follow the rule, remind them of the rule and do what you told them you would.
- Choose to have rules about those things that are most important to you. If you have lots of rules, children won't be able to remember them. Choose a few good rules, and then enforce them.

Youth want to prove they can be responsible.

- Teens have a greater need to prove their independence when we don't change the rules from childhood to adolescence. When we give them more privileges as a way of recognizing their increasing maturity and willingness to take responsibility, we build self-esteem and encourage appropriate growth.

- Teens are experiencing tremendous changes in their bodies and in their social world. It is equally important to them that we recognize these changes by allowing them greater freedom to make some decisions while continuing to set limits that protect them in their expanded, and sometimes scary, world. Setting limits enables us to “let go” gradually with confidence that our children and teens are learning how to make healthy decisions for themselves.

Teens are better able to deal with peer pressure when they know they are loved and respected by their parents.

- They are more likely to make healthy decisions if they’ve already learned from us to focus on their well-being while making decisions.

Children and teens will feel loved and be less likely to question limits or complain if:

- The rules are made to protect them
- The rules are easily understood
- The rules are consistently enforced
- The rules are appropriate for the age and recognize increasing maturity and willingness to accept responsibility
- The rules are made to help reach goals we and they have set
- We are role models of good behavior (not smoking or using drugs).

To change children’s behavior, sometimes we have to make the first changes.

We may find that hard to do for several reasons:

- We may deny that problems exist.
 - Every family has some problems. Recognizing the problem is the first step in solving it. Sometimes we can find our own solutions. We can also learn from relatives and friends or seek help through community agencies, churches and schools.
- We may think problems are our fault.
- We may think children won’t change.

- Children do respond to new approaches, especially those which are expressions of concern for their well-being. We often become discouraged because changes in behavior or attitudes may come slowly, but patience will usually bring about good results.
- We should remember that no parent is perfect, and that our children can overlook many of our faults when they know they are loved. If we are contributing to a problem, we can change if we understand our shortcomings. Again relatives, friends, community agencies, churches or schools are good sources of support and help.

Limit setting, especially for teens, may be easier when we talk about appropriate rules with other parents.

- Teens compare the strictness of their parents against their friends’ parents. Talking with other parents can help ensure that we’re being fair and realistic. It can also help us learn that “everyone else’s parents” aren’t as permissive as reported!

Remember that love builds the foundation for effective discipline.

If you want your children to obey family rules, regularly let them know you love and appreciate them.

Download the "Talking About Rules" Comic [www.udel.edu/content/dam/udelImages/canr/factsh
eets/talking-about-rules.pdf](http://www.udel.edu/content/dam/udelImages/canr/factsheets/talking-about-rules.pdf)

Try this fun activity with your family!

Why?

- All families have rough times. When people know we love them, it makes it easier to get through tough times. One way we can show we care is by being aware of what is going on in each other’s lives and offering support and encouragement to one another. This activity is one way family members can tell each other that they understand and care.

What do we need?

- 3 x 5 cards or some paper, scissors, crayons, pencils or markers

How will it help?

- It will let others know you love and care about them.

How long will it take?

- Only a few minutes, whenever you wish.

What do we do?

1. Think of times another family member might appreciate a few kind words from you, like these:

- Good luck on the test.
- Smile! You look great in braces.
- Thanks for listening last night.
- I'll be thinking of you.
- Go for it!!
- Don't worry. . . we'll work it out.
- We're behind you all the way.
- Stay calm. You'll do fine.
- Hurry home. I'll miss you.
- I'm sorry I snapped at you.

2. Jot down these notes on index cards cut in half. Tuck them into briefcases, luggage, backpacks, purses, lunch boxes, or coat pockets.

3. Encourage everyone in the family to use them and to make up new cards.

References

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