

Helping Parents Set Boundaries

“By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness” (*The Family: A Proclamation to the World*).

What does preside mean? It means that fathers, with their wives, are in charge of the family. They set the tone and standard for the home in love and righteousness.

Unfortunately, in today’s indulgent society, some parents or individuals feel guilty when standing up for what they think is important. They have been taught to be nice, to be charitable, and not to rock the boat. This can become confusing to some who may think it is wrong to tell someone “no.” Research, however, indicates that children need parents to be in charge, and that they feel safest when parents take the lead. To accomplish this, boundaries must be set.

Defining Boundaries

A boundary is an edge. In relationships or families, boundaries allow us to interact with others without conflict. Parents who tell their children “no” are, in fact, teaching their children about standards and limits. The child learns that they don’t need or deserve everything they want.

Every relationship needs to have healthy boundaries that are clear and easy to understand. These boundaries, or family rules, will allow families to work together, as well as to forgive, trust and problem solve.

It is important to distinguish between the two types of boundaries—negotiable and non-negotiable. Non-negotiable boundaries are fixed, and don’t change based on

outside influences, while negotiable boundaries are often changed based on circumstances or behavior. Here are a few key characteristics and examples of each:

Non-negotiable

- Essential standards of righteousness living
- Typically applies to all
- Few in number (an excess of non-negotiable boundaries may indicate coercive parenting)
- Violation of these boundaries would hurt the fabric of the family
- Examples: No substance abuse; live morally; no violence towards others; show respect, etc.

Negotiable

- Based on trust and readiness of family members
- Often situational and may be different for each family member
- Violation of these boundaries typically hurts the trust of an individual or smaller group
- The more obedient the child, the more room they have to negotiate the rules
- Examples: Curfew; ability to play with friends; chores, etc.

Boundaries and Agency

Some parents fear that by setting boundaries they are taking away their child’s agency. In reality, however, the opposite is true: Establishing clear boundaries helps maximize agency. Parents should remember to take into account the psychological needs of their children, and provide them with opportunities to learn and grow by

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Who is West Ridge Academy?

- Gospel Centered
- Spiritual Based
- Youth Residential Treatment
- Helped over 25,000 youth and their families
- Established in 1964



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making decisions.

Children learn the basics of boundary setting early, and continue learning into young adulthood. During this time they learn to 1) show attachment to others while maintaining their identity; 2) say “no” without fear of losing love; 3) accept “no” from others without feeling emotional rejection or withdrawal.

During all of these time periods, children are continuing the process of boundary setting. They are engaged in distinguishing themselves as separate individuals and must do so without detaching from important relationships. Children eventually begin to make their own decisions regarding love, intimacy, identity, career and spirituality. This is a natural part of growing up, and necessary for their transition into adulthood.

The Role of Parents

Children will mature, even if the parents aren't ready. Parents who struggle to embrace the developmental task of boundary setting may actually encourage open rebellion. In addition, parents who find it difficult to set boundaries often trace the origin of this struggle to their own early child development, when they learned to fear boundaries. The following is a list of common causes of boundary setting dilemmas:

1. Unresolved shame. Shame is personalized remorse. In other words, the person feels ashamed of them self, not their behavior. This causes an overactive sense

of remorse, likely stemming from attempts to set boundaries when they were children.

2. Needing to be needed. Parents whose identity comes from the dependence of their children often have difficulty allowing children to make decisions and gain independence.

3. Fear of loss. Children can learn to withdraw love when they don't get their way. Knowing this, parents afraid of losing their child's love are more reluctant to set boundaries.

4. Loss of control. Boundary setting requires letting go of control. Some parents fear the unknown or fear that a child may choose poorly.

Parents need to resolve their personal issues with boundary setting before they can be consistent and effective in setting boundaries with their children.

Setting and Maintaining Boundaries

Every relationship needs to have healthy boundaries that are clear, consistent and easily understood. Boundaries are a necessary part of parenting, and aid in the process of disciplining children. The following guidelines may assist you in your efforts to establish boundaries with your children:

1. Parents should counsel with each other in private to make sure they support each other in the boundary. Single parents may find it helpful to counsel with another parent to make sure the boundary is reasonable.

2. In advance, and with respect, tell the child what the boundary is.

3. Let the child know if the boundary is negotiable based on trust and good decision making or if the boundary is non-negotiable.

4. Explain why the boundary is being set.

5. Ask for compliance. If the child refuses, give him options with consequences. This will help preserve the child's agency.