

Limits Help Children Grow

Have you ever told your children to *stop* doing something they want to do, like throwing their toys when they're mad? Or ever asked them to *start* doing something they wouldn't choose to do on their own, like washing their hands before eating? If so, you have set limits on your children's behaviour. By defining the rules and stating your expectations, you have helped them on their way to being responsible adults who can make good decisions for themselves.

Even though setting limits is an essential part of parenting, few people enjoy doing it. It's much more fun to play with children and give them what they want. Children don't usually respond by saying, "Thank you so much for insisting on the rules I should follow." But without limits, children feel insecure and may develop anxiety. And without limits, how will they learn to take care of themselves and get along with others? How will you pass on the beliefs and values that will guide them in their lives?

Many parents find that they can apply their rules with more confidence and consistency when they think of the reasons behind the limits they set.

Safety and health

It takes a long time and lots of experience before children understand that how they act has consequences for their safety and health. While they are learning, they need caring adults who watch out for them and teach them healthy habits. This is why we require our children to hold our hand when crossing the street, why we feed them a balanced diet, and why we make them brush their teeth. We limit their screen time, make sure they get lots of exercise and insist they go to bed at a reasonable hour. Gradually, as they mature, children learn to do these things for themselves; sometimes it takes longer than we would like.

It is worth noting that Safe Kids Canada recommends waiting till children have developed some judgement and impulse control, around age nine, before allowing them to cross the street without adult supervision. The Canadian Dental Association advises parents to continue helping children brush their teeth until around age six; before that they lack the coordination to do a good job.

Getting along with others

Many limits that parents set are designed to teach children how to get along with other people. These

include social expectations like saying please and thank you and sitting at the table to eat. We also teach children to consider other people's feelings: we tell them to wait their turn, to not take more than their share, and to ask for what they want instead of just grabbing it.

These skills all require children to control their strong emotions and use their thinking abilities. Again, progress can take more time than parents would like. The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain responsible for stopping inappropriate behaviour and then making a better choice. Recent research shows that this part of the brain doesn't reach full maturity until around age 25. Expect to be setting limits and coaching better choices for a long time!

Passing on beliefs and values

Other limits express parents' beliefs and values. If religious faith is important in your life, that will be reflected in your standards and expectations. You will want to pass your faith on to your children, along with its prescribed practices. The same is true of other beliefs and values you hold dear. You may insist that your children attend language and culture classes outside school hours so that they will value their cultural origins. If you believe that success in school will enable your children to take their place in society, you will make homework an essential part of their routine.

At puberty, children start developing their ability to deal with complex information, even if the prefrontal cortex isn't fully mature until much later. Teenagers often question their parents' beliefs and values and test the limits that have been set. Conflicts over beliefs and values are harder to resolve than simple questions about health and safety. Without giving up their own standards, parents may need to negotiate some of the limits they have previously set for their children.

Looking after ourselves

Safety, health, social skills, beliefs and values—all good reasons to hold fast to your expectations. But if you don't have enough energy, you won't be able to enforce your limits when your children test them...and children will always test limits. Protecting your own energy is another good reason to set limits on your children's behaviour. Make time in your family's routine for looking after yourself so you can have the patience and energy it takes to help your children grow.

by Betsy Mann