Limit Setting

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Babies and toddlers have big feelings but can't always control those big feelings. When they have tantrums and "act up," they're often showing you they are overwhelmed by their feelings and need support. Young children need age-appropriate limits to develop self-control. This takes time and is something they learn gradually. Indeed, many adults still struggle with this!

Limits help children feel safe when they are out of control. Children test limits because they want to know that the limit is solid. They also want to see what will happen next, or what your reaction might be. Imagine a child walking along a fence, testing every single fence post to see if they can break through. If those fence posts, your limits, are strong and reliable, the limit testing will decrease.

THE POWER OF PREVENTION: HEADING OFF MISBEHAVIOR

- **Decide if setting a limit is necessary.** It's good to know how and when to avoid power struggles. Get clear on what is important and where you can be flexible. For example, can you live with an outfit that doesn't match if your child wants to choose their own shirt? And if you're going to say yes, say yes right away, but if it's no, then it's no all day.
- **Be consistent.** Set up a few clear and age-appropriate rules. This helps your child understand what you expect. Follow through on the rule every time. If they throw a toy, put it away, every time, right away. Then they learn not to throw toys.
- **Offer tools to help them wait.** Set a kitchen timer. This may help your child feel more relaxed if you need five minutes to fold some clothes. Ask an older toddler to do a puzzle, sing songs, or look at books to occupy some time.
- **Help with daily transitions.** It is common that young children have a hard time stopping an activity and moving on to the next. If your child has a hard time with transitions, give them a heads-up five minutes before it's time to change activities, and then two

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minutes before, and then one minute. A routine can also help when going from lunch to nap. Read a favorite book to make the transition easier.

- **Offer choices to give your child a sense of age-appropriate control.** Ask, "Do you want the blue or red cup?" Avoid asking questions when no choice is being offered. Say "It's time to get in the bath" instead of "Do you want to get in the bath?"
- **Look for ways to help your child practice self-control.** Turn-taking games help children learn to wait. Take turns mixing the cake batter. Play Red Light/Green Light.
- **Validate the feelings while holding the limit.** Your child's feelings are not right or wrong. It is how feelings *get expressed* that can be a problem. Make space for feelings ("I see that you are upset.") while putting limits on behavior ("I will stop you from hitting."). This can be done calmly and without shame.

SETTING LIMITS IS ALL ABOUT YOUR SELF-REGULATION

- **Stay calm and present in the face of a tantrum.** When your child is having a hard time, they need you to be calm. If you have a big reaction (getting angry, yelling), your child is likely to get even more upset. Then it's harder for them to calm down.
- **Set your limit with as little emotion (and as few words) as possible.** Talk in a quiet, steady voice. Be aware of the nonverbal messages you're sending with your face and body. A kind tone of voice can help calm your child. It's also a way to soothe yourself during stressful times.
- **Be matter of fact and use simple language.** Children are very sensitive to your words and tone. If you are calm, they are more likely to pay attention to what you are saying. If you are angry and upset, they may focus more on your feelings than your words.
- **Take a time-out yourself if you need it.** If you are too angry to respond to your child without your own big feelings, walk away for a few minutes. Not only will it help you calm down before dealing with your child, it will show your child how to begin to learn about self-regulation.

SCAN FOR MORE INFO

All toddlers try to push the limits. This newly found independence is an important part of their development. They build inner discipline gradually and will eventually develop the ability to self-regulate. Your firm, kind limits help make this happen. You might not see results right away, but stick with it and you will!

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