

THE IMPORTANCE OF SETTING LIMITS

There are lots of good reasons that parents want to learn to be firm limit setters with young children. First and most obvious is the responsibility you feel to keep your children safe. Another reason is purely practical. To get through each day, whether you're a working or a stay at home parent, you have to be able to count on your child's listening to you and following directions at least a majority of the time. Perhaps the most important but the least often recognized reason for learning to set limits is your child's emotional and social well-being. Your child's happiness depends on hearing a clear and firm "no" every now and then. Your child's security depends on knowing what you expect and knowing that you will help your child meet your expectations. Your child's development depends on an environment that is safe and, to some extent predictable. It depends on adults who are also safe and predictable who can be counted on to give clear messages, who can be depended on to set limits calmly and firmly, who can even be depended on to get angry sometimes. Because children experience a wide range of emotions, it is important that they see the adults around them also experience such emotions, express them appropriately, and move on.

One day a mother picked her three year old up from school. The child was sitting in her stroller. The mother reached into a bag to take out the child's after school snack, a small bag of pretzels, as well as a large container of pretzels to give to the teachers for a classroom snack the next day. She offered her daughter the small container of pretzels she told her she was going to give the big one to the teachers. The child protested. She wanted the bigger container. The mother explained, cajoled, asked the child to see reason, to think of her classmates' needs, and even tried bribing her with bigger and better snacks once they got home. The child dug in her heels, and a full tantrum was clearly on the horizon. Finally, the tired mother gave in, and they left with the child munching on

pretzels from the big container, cradling it in her lap as her mother pushed the stroller out the door. The mother was clearly exasperated, and also disappointed in her child's apparent selfishness. A choice of pretzels had assumed moral weight where none should have been.

The mother in this example did not want a conflict, and she did want to communicate to her child that she heard and respected her opinions and wishes. But what did the child actually learn from this exchange? My mother is afraid to see me get mad. If I talk enough about what I want or if I get mad enough about it, my mom will give in. Even though she gave me what I wanted, my mother is angry and disappointed in me. The child feels confused-- who is really in charge?

What if things had gone differently? What if the mother had simply said, "The small bag is your snack. The big one is for the class. I know you're upset about it, but that's how it is. Now, let's go home." In this case, what would the child have learned? My mom means what she says. I can't always have my own way. My mom isn't afraid of me when I have a tantrum. Even if my mom and I have an argument, we can get through it and move on. The child in this case is reassured that her mom's in charge, really a pretty good feeling.

When parents set firm, clear limits and follow through by helping the child meet their expectations, they are creating an orderly world for a child to explore and understand. Children will still test limits, they will still argue and have tantrums but they will do these things with the understanding that adults are in charge, adults know what to do, adults keep them safe and love them no matter what.

When limits are ever changing, when there is no follow through, the world feels like a much more dangerous place. Some children may stop taking the necessary risks of testing limits and exploring their world and making

sense of it. They may become timid, overly anxious children. Others may become seriously oppositional and feel they have to push and push to find the limit that will make them feel safe and protected.

At Downtown Little School we recommend firm and consistent limit setting because it works. There has undoubtedly been a cultural shift away from clear limits and away from the word, "no," and toward things like explaining, negotiating, distracting, and often just plain old giving in to children's demands. We think this does children a profound disservice. And, of course, it makes life harder for both you and your child.

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