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Setting Limits

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Setting Limits

In all athletic team competitions, the home and visiting teams and their corresponding fans all go by the same rules and boundaries. The rules are published in a book and knowledge of the rules is essential to understanding and playing the game. Making sure the players stay within the limits established by the rulebook is the job of the officials. If a player breaks a rule, the referee penalizes the entire team. The player and his team must accept the consequences. The referee's interpretation of the game is final.

The words "football game" can tell us many things. The very name of the game determines the shape of the ball, the dimensions of the playing field, the rules of the game, and the type of clothes the players and officials wear.

The word family also tells us many things. Determined limits make a family unique. Every family has identifying marks relative to their type of house, church, school, recreation, mealtimes, friends, house rules, etc. Every family's set of limits is unique, but certain components are common to most because they are based on common sense. Some limits are fully established and do not change over the course of time, while others naturally evolve as children grow and mature.

Infants usually experience their first limits when they try to squirm out of their car seat or stroller. It is also a major discovery when babies crawl into the baby gate that divides them from a set of stairs. Young preschoolers usually learn the basic limits that will take many forms throughout their whole lifetimes. These include limits pertaining to health and safety, respecting property, and respecting other people's rights, belongings, and feelings.

Limits provide a basis for consistency and structure that ensure the well being of your children. If you are consistent, your children will know what to expect. When limits are consistent, they are more easily internalized by the children, and following them becomes a lifestyle for them. This will help them become adults who have self-control and who easily conform to the limits placed on them by society.

Limits do not eliminate the problem of human nature, nor will they change children's basic attitudes, or their spirits. In fact, limits will often reveal inner attitudes and a child's true personality. However, by setting limits you allow your

children some freedom of choice, you make things in your home more predictable, and you provide a framework for dealing with your children.

Children will never maintain limits perfectly. They will need lots of reminders, particularly when they are in new situations that require new limits and new expectations. We must also keep in mind that children have their own ups and downs, just like adults do, and therefore some days they will need more help than others. An adult's responsibility of dealing with what appears to be noncompliance must always take into consideration a child's developmental readiness for ideas and activities.

Depending on the age of the child, you may give a simple rule with or without a reason. Very young children think concretely and will not be able to grasp the reasons for the limit unless you can explain it in four simple words or less. Even then, he might not make the connection. An older child, on the other hand, will want to know that reason. Telling the child the reason has the benefit of helping the child develop reasoning skills. However, you do not need to repeat that reason 20 times! If the older child is asking you to explain yourself over and over, he is probably looking for a means of non-compliance.

Parents are teachers. You must work with your children in the spirit of a helpful teacher. Remember that children learn day by day as they become developmentally ready to move on to the next step. Before dishing out consequences, first find out if you did your job of giving your child the best possible opportunity for fulfilling your request.

Try to think of limits as beings areas of freedom.

For example, in our home we had designated areas for play. In the living room, you could read or play the stereo. In the family room, you could play with remote control cars, toys, or games. The only limitation was to put the game or toy back when you were through with it. There were even some things you could do in the kitchen. You could always help with the dishes. You could help prepare meals ... or bake cookies. Or you could sit in the kitchen and talk with whoever was baking!

The only limitation in any of these rooms was that you could not throw things or hit anyone and you had to take your turn.

You could make all the noise you wanted in the basement, garage, or bedroom, or outside! The limits defined the options for each area. Our children learned to make choices within the limits and to respect the rights of others.

Tony discovered a framework for dealing with Caleb after going out of his way to set what he thought was a reasonable limit with his 11-year-old.

“Let’s set a reasonable limit, Caleb. Before supper, you wash your hands.”

“Okay, Dad, that sounds reasonable.”

Of course it was reasonable until just before supper ... and then Caleb suddenly disagreed with Dad. After all, his hands were not that dirty, and he was hungry!

When a rule is new, children need help remembering the limit. However, when they refuse to follow a rule, they will need help! The degree of a child’s resistance usually determines the kind or degree of help that is necessary. When the child has firmly established in his mind that you mean what you say and there will be further consequences if he does not comply, abiding by the limit will become part of his routine. In this case, Caleb needed a reminder that he had agreed to this arrangement, and that if he did not comply he would be helping wash the dishes after the meal.

You may be thinking, “What about a child’s attitude? Will limits and expectations ruin them emotionally?” Remember, guiding children is not changing their spirits. Changing their spirits can only happen when they are born again by the Spirit of God. After this happens, they will become more like Him each day. They are people, just like you, but remember that people have turned to their own ways for a long time!

Holding to limits provides security and stability for everyone in the family and both parents must be committed to the family plan.

I did not think too much about it the evening my daughter approached me just as I was ready to walk up on the platform to speak.

“Hey, Dad, can I have the keys to the car after the meeting? I want to take a carload of kids to the beach.”

“Okay,” I said, without thinking.

Then I went to the platform to make my speech about how important it is for a husband and wife to agree on and be committed to the limits they establish for their children. After I finished my speech, I went to a large foyer in the back of the auditorium where hundreds of people were milling around.

My daughter had a large group of her friends standing behind her when she came up to me and said, “Dad, I need the keys now.”

I could see that my wife was upset when she heard my daughter say this to me. In response to my daughter’s announcement that she was ready for the car keys, my wife said to her, “But I told you that you couldn’t go.”

Well, there were some people standing around who heard this exchange, and they started assembling another little congregation to see how the speaker would handle this.

You cannot think of everything, especially when you are traveling. You can expect your children to pick times like that to test the limits. But we had a limit at our house: The first parent you have asked about something gives the last and final answer. Because the limit was clear and consistently kept, my decision was easy. My answer would be easily determined by my daughter’s answer to one simple question: Who did you ask about this first—me or your mother?

It turned out she had asked her mother first.

So I said to my daughter, “You know the answer. You asked your mother first.”

Her response was, “But, Dad, you’re embarrassing me in front of all these people.”

Here she not only had willfully tried to disobey her mother by getting permission from me to do something her mother had already told her she could not do, but now was trying to manipulate me by trying to make me feel guilty about embarrassing her in front of all these people.

I stuck to my guns—much to the dismay of my daughter and the relief of my wife. Holding to limits like this one provided security and stability for all of us. I could look to the limit and easily know how to respond; my wife knew that I supported her decisions; and my daughter knew that she could rely on us to be consistent. In that moment, my daughter and wife saw that I was trustworthy.

There will be times when you will think a limit is quite sensible, but your children may think it inhibits their freedom too much. Remember, you are the leaders, not your children. Without a united front, children learn to play one parent against the other and what your child is learning at home will be expressed in his relationships outside the home.

Structure and boundaries are fundamental ways in which parents can express their love for their children. All limits should have the following characteristics:

- They should help a child know what is expected of him.
- They should be reachable, reasonable, and clearly understood.
- They must allow for some freedom of choice.
- There should be as few limits as possible.