

## **Setting Limits with Young Children**

*"It's time for bed!" you tell your 2.5 year old. "No! I'm playing!" she shouts back. You've already announced that it's bedtime twice at this point. "You'll be able to play with your toys again tomorrow. Now it's time for bed." "No, no, no!" she shouts, beginning to cry. "Okay, okay, two more minutes and then it is bedtime," you respond. Some time goes by, and you repeat to your child, who is still playing, "It's been two minutes. Now it's time for bed." "No! No! No! Still playing!" your child shouts, beginning to cry. You sigh, knowing that you're in for an hour long bedtime, filled with coaxing and bribing, just to get your child to bed.*

Ah, setting limits. As educators, this is something teachers do at CHP with young children all day long. It can be a constant battle for parents at home, too. What's the best way to set limits? How do I get my 3 year old to listen to me when I tell him not to do something? How do I get my 2 year old to eat her breakfast? Is it possible to get out of the door in the morning without a battle? You're not alone if you're asking these questions and there isn't a simple answer. However, in order to be able to set consistent limits, it's important to understand why children test limits in the first place.

### ***Why won't you put your shoes on?!***

There's a plethora of reasons why children test limits (they're exhausted, they're hungry, they're overwhelmed, they're understimulated, they're craving connection), but one of the biggest reasons is because they're trying to figure out who is really in charge and where the boundary line lies. *If Mom says "no" right now, will the answer still be "no" in an hour? Will it be "no" tomorrow? Mom might be saying "no," but will Dad say "yes"? If I cry and scream will they change their mind?* As young children become more and more autonomous, they are in a constant battle between craving independence and still needing their grown-ups to be in control. If children are given too much power, they don't know what to do with it. Too much freedom feels scary for a child and they might actually begin to feel the opposite of free, which causes them to push the boundaries even more. Although the limits you are setting may not be enjoyable for them, it shows them that you love and care about them, and it ultimately keeps them feeling safe.

*So, how do I go about setting clear and consistent limits?*

### **Be Calm, Clear, and Confident When Setting Your Expectations**

Tell your child exactly what you expect from them. You might say, "If you don't put on your shoes, you won't be able to go outside." When you set this expectation, make sure you tell your child this calmly and confidently. If you aren't confident in the limit that you're setting, your child will be able to sense that. If you decide to pick them up and carry them to the car without putting their shoes on, they will push the limit again the next time you're leaving the house. If you let it go once, why wouldn't you let it go again? Empathizing with your child and reflecting their emotions in these instances can be helpful as well. You might say, "I

can tell you're feeling mad about putting your shoes on. You were having so much fun playing and it's hard to stop. We have to leave the house now to pick up your sister. It's okay to feel mad." By validating their feelings, you're showing them that you do understand how they're feeling, even though you are still following through on your limit. You might also model problem-solving. "You have to put your shoes on to go out to the car, but you can take them off again once you're in your car seat" or "When we get back home I wonder if you'll keep playing with your animals? Ooh should we build a zoo together?" This can help your child cope with their frustration or disappointment in the moment.

### **Be Consistent!**

Following through on a set limit is just as important as setting a limit in the first place. Consistency teaches children that their world is a predictable place. For example, if you stub your toe on the coffee table, it will hurt every single time. Setting limits is similar. You might tell your child, "If you throw that toy on the floor, I'm going to put it away." When they throw the toy on the floor again, your job is to follow through and put it away. If two out of five times you don't follow through, your child won't know that a consistent limit has been set and they will continue to push it. It also makes it that much harder for you to set an unwavering limit in the future. By being consistent, your child learns that they can trust what you say and this makes them feel both safe and secure.

### **Target an Alternative**

It's not always possible to target an alternative, but often it is. Providing alternatives has the advantage of not chipping away at a child's self-esteem: the child's impulse (to throw, kick, run, jump, etc.) is healthy and normal, but some expressions of this desire are more permissible than others. "I don't want you to throw my shirts on the floor, but I can tell you really feel like throwing something. Oh, I have an idea, let's go outside and throw the ball around."

### **Expect Limit Testing**

This may be a given, but your child will inevitably be pushing the limits that you set. While this kind of oppositional or negative behavior can be very frustrating for parents, it is a normal and crucial aspect of early childhood development. Testing limits is your child's job as a healthy child who is learning about the world around them. You should expect these behaviors and not be surprised by them. If your child is up two hours past their bedtime, they will most likely have a meltdown! If your child hasn't had their lunch and it's an hour past their lunchtime, they will most likely be whiny! In these moments where your child is feeling big feelings, try to be understanding. If you know bedtime is a limit-testing time of day, give your child reminders and tell them, "In five minutes, it will be time to go to bed! Now is a good time to finish that puzzle if you want to finish it before bedtime," or, "After this book, it will be bedtime." Young children are driven by their strong feelings and quick impulses, and your job is to continue to be consistent and confident so that your child knows that they can fully depend on you.

*So now, what does all of this consistent limit setting do for my child?*

When children have consistent limits set, they're able to gain self-control and trust in their grown-ups, as well as build upon their problem solving skills. Instead of focusing on pushing the limits that are being set around them, they are able to focus on playing, creating, and socializing. However, this doesn't mean that your child won't cry or whine when you set limits around leaving the house, eating meals, and going to bed. There's often a common misconception that you don't want your child to cry or act out in these situations. However, showing their feelings in this way is both typical and healthy. Children are developing social and emotional skills, and their emotions can change from high to low and back again in a matter of seconds. That's all a part of being a child, and that's okay! As adults, we're still learning self-control, so imagine how it might feel for your child. We don't want to stop our children from feeling big emotions; we just want to help them feel cared for while doing so and to know that once they're finished expressing their feelings, we are always there to comfort them. And we want them to know that we still love them, no matter what big feelings they have or how strongly they express them!

Now, the idea of constantly setting limits might sound scary and overwhelming; where do you find the time, not to mention the patience? It will be hard at first. It will take time, some deep breathing, and the ability to stay calm, but in the end your child will begin to learn that pushing limits isn't necessarily the way to get what they want, and both of your days may feel a little less cloudy and a lot more sunny.

#### References:

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