

LIMIT-SETTING RUPTURES

Children benefit when parents create structure in their lives. A child learns which behaviors are appropriate within the family and the larger culture by the limits set by parents. Setting limits can create tension between parent and child. When a child desires to do something and the parent cannot allow that behavior, a limit-setting rupture may occur. Such a rupture at the time of limit setting involves the child's emotional distress and a sense of disconnection from the parent. In this situation, the child's desire to carry out a particular action or to have some object is not supported by the parent. This lack of attunement between parent and child can leave the child feeling distressed. The child wants something that the parent cannot give him. Parents can't always say yes to their children's requests. If children ask for ice cream right before dinner, demand a toy every time they go to the store, or attempt to climb on the dining-room table, there is a parental need to set limits. These limit-setting experiences are crucial for the child. They involve the child's developing a healthy sense of inhibition in which the child learns that what he or she wanted to do is not safe or socially appropriate within the family setting.

When a child hears "no," she feels a sense that her desire or action was "wrong." The parent can help to redirect her impulse into a more socially appropriate and safe direction. The key to staying in connection during these limit-setting interactions is to realign yourself with your child's primary emotional state. You can empathize and reflect back to your child the essence of her desire without actually fulfilling her wish: "I know you'd like to have some ice cream. It's too close to dinner, but maybe can have some ice cream after dinner." This is a much different experience for the child than just hearing the parent say: "No! You can't have it."

Many times, empathic and reflective comments can help your child move on past his frustration at not getting what he wanted. However, even if the parent offers the most supportive response, a child may still feel upset and adamant about his desire, no matter what you say or do. Allowing your child to have his distress without trying to punish him or indulge him can offer him the opportunity to learn how to tolerate his own emotional discomfort. You do not have to fix the situation by giving in or by trying to get rid of his uncomfortable feelings. Letting your child have his emotion and letting him know that you understand that it's hard not to get what he wants is the kindest and most helpful thing you can do for your child at that moment.

Parents can often learn how to parent more effectively from reflecting on unsatisfying or difficult experiences with their children. Here's one mother's story that might help you gain more understanding of the dynamics between a mother and child during a limit-setting rupture.

It's 7:30 A.M. and Mom is in the kitchen fixing breakfast while mentally reviewing the many tasks on her "to do" list for the day. Four-year-old Jack is his usual energetic self and starts to climb on some baskets that are stacked in the corner by the refrigerator. "Don't climb on those. It's not safe. What do you want up there anyway?" asks Mom.

"I want my bunny grass," replies Jack.

Mom definitely doesn't want to deal with the leftover Easter basket grass, so she lies and tells him that there is no bunny grass on top of the refrigerator. Jack, knowing she's not telling the truth, confronts her with "Yes there is!" Mom, feeling guilty about having lied, produces the bunny grass and reluctantly hands it to her son, asking, "What are you going to do with it?" Jack starts to pull all the grass out of the bag and heads toward the dining room. "Don't take that stuff

Examples

out of the kitchen. I don't want it all over the house. It gets caught in the vacuum cleaner." Jack ignores her until she calls his name sternly and he turns back toward the kitchen. "Just pretending," he says as he goes over to his play kitchen and starts "decorating" it by laying bits of bunny grass on it.

Dad is reading the newspaper at the table. A few minutes later, Mom looks over and sees that Jack is now "decorating" the breakfast table. Each place mat, as well as the salt and pepper shakers, now has bits of green plastic grass draped across it. Mom views this as a big mess that *she's* going to have to take care of and says sternly, "Don't put any bunny grass at my place." Jack ignores her and "decorates" her place. "Most kids don't even get to have bunny grass when it's not Easter," she says, but Jack continues to ignore his mother. "You're not listening to my words," she chastises.

Dad tries to offer some support: "Your mother doesn't want bunny grass there." But Jack seems to have lost his hearing and continues with his play. In exasperation, Mom yells, "Get that bunny grass out of there!" Dad calls Jack's name in a threatening tone.

Jack, feeling angry at being yelled at, mumbles, "Oh, all right" as he clears the bunny grass off his mother's place and throws it on the floor. This blatant act of disrespect angers Dad, who jumps up and tries to wrestle the remaining grass away from his son. "That's it! No more bunny grass!" he shouts. Jack screams and cries and tries to hang on to the bag of grass, wailing, "But I did what you said! I took it off!"

The morning has deteriorated into a yelling match as Mom and Dad try to wrestle the bunny grass away. They have a strong sense of how foolish this all is. Jack is angry and getting more furious by the moment. Exasperated, the parents offer some ineffectual consequence as a "compromise" in which the bunny grass ends up in a "time-out" and is put in the cupboard. Later in the day, while his parents are away,

Jack talks his babysitter into letting him scatter the grass all over the house. "Sure, Mom lets me do it," he tells her.

How might the morning have gone differently? One obvious solution would be to pack the leftover bunny grass away if it was not an option to play with it. But twenty-twenty hindsight is always easy. There are many other points in the communication where the scenario could have moved in a more positive direction. Here are some possibilities. Mom could have told the truth about the bunny grass being on top of the refrigerator and set the limit right then. "Yes, the bunny grass is up there, but it's not for playing with now. Do you want to make a plan to play with it later when we're finished with breakfast?"

What if Mom had already given him the grass to appease him and soothe her guilt for lying, before she saw the impending difficulties? She could have stopped cooking breakfast and addressed the situation while it was still only a small irritation. "Jack, this isn't going to work right now! I should have said, 'No bunny grass until after breakfast.' I'm going to put it away now and you can think of a place where you can play with it later so it won't make a mess." By setting a limit early she can be more effective and follow through without frightening him or challenging him to engage in a power struggle.

We could imagine the scene with different options at points where the situation moves toward greater conflict. At these points, what could the parents have said or done differently? There is no single right answer, but many possible choices a parent could make. It is, however, important for the parent to take some action rather than just verbally reacting and threatening the child. As we can see, Jack kept pushing the boundary to see what was "enough," because the limits were set with ambivalence and there was a lack of clarity and congruence in his mother's messages. She was giving mixed signals that encouraged him to find out what she really meant so he persisted in testing the limits.

Reworking this scene, thinking up other choices and anticipating the possible outcomes, is an interesting exercise. You might want to think about a situation with your own child when you lost your temper and you weren't satisfied with the outcome. Try to understand why your child may have responded the way he or she did and what you could have done to shift the energy in a more positive direction.

We have to check in with ourselves so we can become clear in our own minds on the limit we want to establish and the message we want to deliver. Setting limits is a way of showing respect for ourselves as well as our children; they are more effective when we set them before we are angry.

TOXIC RUPTURES

Ruptures that involve intense emotional distress and a despairing disconnection between a parent and a child can be experienced as harmful to a child's sense of self and are therefore called "toxic ruptures." Children may feel rejected and hopelessly alone during these moments of friction. When a parent loses control of his or her emotions and engages in screaming, name-calling, or threatening behavior toward a child, it can create a toxic rupture. Toxic ruptures often happen when a parent has entered the low road. For a person in a low-road state, flexible and contingent communication is impossible. These toxic ruptures are the most distressing form of disconnection for children because they are often accompanied by an intense feeling of overwhelming shame. When shame occurs, there is a physiological reaction; children may have an ache in their stomach, heaviness in their chest, and an impulse to avoid eye contact. They may feel deflated and withdrawn and begin to think of themselves as being "bad" and defective.

When parents have leftover or unresolved issues, they are especially at risk for entering into toxic ruptures with their children. Parents can become lost in the depths of a low-road state, and even if they recognize the toxic rupture, they will be unlikely to be able to repair it until they have centered themselves. This centering often requires that parents disconnect themselves from the interaction with their child. They needn't necessarily create physical distance, but making the mental space to become centered is usually vital in order for parents to calm themselves down. If parents stay on the low road and continue to try to interact, they will be emotionally reactive and their leftover issues will cloud their ability to parent effectively.

Sustained and frequent toxic ruptures may lead to significant negative effects on the child's growing sense of self. It is important that these ruptures be repaired in an empathic, effective, and timely manner so that the child's developing identity is not damaged.

Once we feel calm and are able to reflect on the situation, we will have left the low-road state. It may be difficult for any of us to see ourselves as having been hurtful or frightening to our children—but we can be. We may be reluctant to see ourselves as being out of control. This reluctance may lead to our denial of our own role in the toxically ruptured connection with our children. It is important for us to take responsibility for our actions: an important aspect of repair is to acknowledge our own role in the disrupted connection: "I am sorry that I yelled at you when you came in late for dinner without even listening to what you had to say. It was starting to get dark. I must have been worried that something might have happened to you. I didn't mean to scare you by yelling so loudly. I really went overboard. I should have listened to you and then told you what I was worried about." Reflecting with a child on the inner emotional experience of the altercation can be crucial for both parent and child. This reflection

a sinking feeling. This is similar to the profile for shame. This limit-setting "no"-induced form of shame is what some researchers call a "healthy" kind of shame, different from toxic shame and humiliation. Children learn to regulate their behaviors by developing an emotional clutch, located in the prefrontal cortex, that can turn the accelerator off when the brakes are applied and redirect their interests in more acceptable directions. Children learn that at times what they want to do is not permissible and they need to redirect their energies.

Children who do not have these important limit-setting experiences may have an underdevelopment of the emotional clutch, which is a building block of response flexibility. Parents who don't want to be identified as the "bad parent" often resist setting limits and are unable to provide their children with these important developmental experiences. Their child's emotional clutch is not developed enough to allow her to rechannel her energy in productive ways. One of our roles as parents is to facilitate our children's development of their ability to balance the brakes and accelerators that enable them to delay gratification and modify their impulses. This means that our children learn to hear "no" but also to maintain their spirit and belief in themselves. These are essential components of emotional intelligence. Your child is excited about throwing toys or climbing on the kitchen counters. We say "no." The brakes are slammed on. We help to redirect him toward actions that will satisfy both his energy and his desire for movement so we say, "You could go outside and get that basket of balls. I bet you could throw those really far," or "The counters aren't for climbing but you could go outside and climb to the top of the tower by your swing set. You could probably see really far from up there." Now the accelerator is turned on again when the child senses your attunement to his inner state of excitement about throwing or climbing; the brakes turn off as the accelerator now redirects play to socially appropriate activities. Setting limits, creating clear boundaries for acceptable behaviors,

and offering structure gives children the important experiences that enable them to have a sense of safety and security. Experiencing these essential "no's" gives them the opportunity to develop the capacity for self-regulation that permits them to put on the brakes and redirect their energies in other directions. The emotional clutch of children who have not been given the chance to develop this important aspect of self-regulation often reveals an inability to flexibly adapt to the environment. "No" is followed by a torrent of indignation and tantruming as their prefrontal region cannot engage the clutch and create a flexible response. The ensuing meltdown and inflexible behavior is exhausting for child and parent alike.

Parents help teach children to regulate this emotional clutch in order to balance their accelerator and brakes. In order to do this, a parent needs to be able to tolerate the tension and discomfort that a child may experience when the parent sets a limit. If a parent cannot tolerate a child's being upset it is very difficult for the child to learn to regulate her emotions. A limit-setting "no" is best followed by calm, clear follow-through by the parent. If we always capitulate and give our child what she wants just to keep her from being upset, we will not support our child in developing a healthy ability to apply the brakes and redirect an activity. It is not necessary or even helpful to verbally reason with our children all the time. If we only value the logical mind, we'll get into endless arguments and negotiations, and our children will think that if they make a reasonable argument, we should always act according to their wishes. Sometimes it's okay to say, "No, that's just not okay with me" or "I understand how you feel, but I'm not going to change my mind." We don't have to explain all of our decisions or give a reason for everything we do and expect our children to readily agree with us.

If we scream and yell at a child when she complains after we say "no," we will generate the unfortunate response of deepening a sense of