

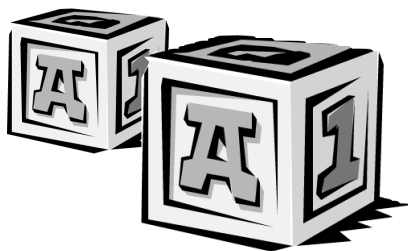


# 4

## SETTING LIMITS

*Discipline is a funny thing – you notice it most when it isn't there* <sup>3</sup>

As children hurtle along the path of growth and development, one of our main roles as parents is to provide boundaries which help to contain and guide them. Some boundaries are physical, and already exist, like the pavement at the side of the road. Others are social, for example: *Stop hitting your baby sister*. By setting limits on children's behaviour we help children learn an acceptable 'code' of behaviour. However, this can often be easier said than done!



### Building blocks

Why boundaries?  
What's your parenting style?  
Love and discipline  
Being assertive  
Behaviour and needs  
Acceptable and unacceptable behaviour  
Whose problem?  
The myth of consistency  
Giving feedback

### Why boundaries?

Children need boundaries for a variety of reasons – for protection and security as well as to learn about behaviour:

- ◆ **SAFETY** – From a safety gate at the top of the stairs when the child is a toddler, to a front door or garden gate when she or he is older, to time limits (when to be home by) for older children and teenagers, boundaries help keep children safe. They provide protection.
- ◆ **SECURITY** – Generally, children need to know where they stand – that is, what the 'rules' are, for themselves and others. If adequate boundaries are in place, these help to provide a framework within which a child feels supported. For example, a child plays in the garden secure in the knowledge that there is a fence, and that cars are not 'allowed' to come in there.

- ◆ **CO-OPERATION** – Children learn that they have to modify their behaviour sometimes in order to fit in with other people’s needs or with a broader plan. For example, they could probably go on playing for hours and hours, but learn that they have to stop at family tea time. Gradually they start to learn about time limits.
- ◆ **SOMETHING TO PUSH AGAINST** – Children often need to ‘test’ boundaries in order to know where the limits are. This is part of their normal and natural behaviour, and boundaries change, of course, as a child grows and develops. If adequate boundaries are not in place, a child may resort to more and more extreme kinds of behaviour in order to feel any kind of boundary.
- ◆ **DISCIPLINE** – Boundaries provide guidelines for behaviour. They help children learn what is socially acceptable, and unacceptable behaviour. Setting clear limits, such as saying *STOP!* or *NO!* are ways of stopping unacceptable behaviour.
- ◆ **SELF-DISCIPLINE** – As children learn there are limits to their activities and behaviour, they learn inner control and *self-discipline* – i.e. how to set limits for themselves. They are then more likely to grow up into responsible, socially intelligent adults than children who have been set no limits at all.
- ◆ **PERSONAL BOUNDARIES** – As children learn about people’s personal boundaries, they learn to respect their own bodies and property as well as those of other people. For example, saying *Rana doesn’t like being hit* or *David doesn’t like us using his train set without asking first* helps a child learn that s/he has the right to say where his or her own levels of comfort are too.

So the big question is: how do we decide, or identify where the boundaries are? Much depends on the age and stage of development of each child, as well as the needs of the family. A three-year-old might be allowed to make a mess with play dough all over the kitchen table, but not at family mealtimes. With clear and firm guidelines, the child learns what the limits are.

*Much also depends on your own values and cultural beliefs and individual style of parenting.*

## What’s your parenting style?

Are you the kind of parent who lets your children get away with anything, or are you very strict with them? Most parents are somewhere inbetween – in fact, many parents are *extremely* tolerant most of the time, and then extremely intolerant at others! The following diagram shows some variations of parenting styles. Where in the picture would you place yourself?

### Parenting Styles<sup>4</sup>

