

5 Tips for Setting Limits Without Yelling or Threats

Research tells us that children develop optimally when we set limits as necessary, but do so with empathy.

1 Start with Connection

Take every opportunity to build connections. When setting limits you can start with connection, by coming close and getting down to the child's level. Show an interest in what the child is doing. If you want your child to put toys away, first show an interest in what they are playing.

2 Who is Responsible?

Power struggles ensue when adults try to control things that are actually the child's responsibility. Children need to have authority over their own bodies. You can decide what time dinner is and what is served but the child is responsible for what and how much they eat.

3 Necessary & Appropriate

- Limits for safety are necessary and non-negotiable
- Consistent routines are important
- Establish limits based on family values
- Are limits appropriate for child's developmental level, temperament and current state, (ie, tired, hungry etc.)

4 Empathize

Seek to understand your child's point of view and make space for feelings.
Accept and validate the feelings. Maintain the limit.

5 Scaffold the Learning

The intention is to guide and teach your child to manage their time, set their own limits and boundaries and make good choices. Children need opportunities to practice, try things out, make mistakes and develop their independence. They need to learn self-discipline, it doesn't just happen.

5 Steps to Maintain Limits When Your Child Pushes Back and Emotions are Intense

Children have a developmental need to test, push and challenge the limits set. It's part of how they learn about their world and relationships.

1 Stay Calm

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The pause is a powerful tool. If you can stop before reacting, the chances of responding from a place of calm or at least from the appearance of calm are much better. Take a breath. Squeeze your hands together. Find what works for you?

2 Accept and Validate Feelings

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To accept and validate a child's feelings when they challenge a limit we have set feels like we are encouraging them to disobey.

But, feelings and behavior are different. It is possible and important to accept and validate the feelings and to maintain the limit.

3 Clear Messages

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The messages we give our children matter. It can be tempting in the middle of the tantrum to offer a threat. Threats delivered from our own dysregulated state are often unreasonable and not something we can follow through on. Pause and offer something that will help the situation and maintain the limit. Make sure you say what you mean so that your child receives clear, meaningful messages.

4 Offer Choices When Appropriate

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Choice is not always possible or appropriate but can be a useful strategy when it is. Choice gives the child some control. The sense of no control is often where upset comes from for children (and adults) so to offer choice can help to restore their sense of control.

5 Follow Through

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Once the child is calm, maintain the limit. When parents provide a safe space for feelings while also reinforcing the limit, the child has the freedom to challenge the limit, finally accept it and move on.

The child also learns that they can tolerate their rage, misery and other intense emotions and feel better afterwards. This is the beginning of resilience.

