

How to set limits on your child's behaviour ... and stick to them

A guide for parents



**West Lothian Child and Adolescent
Mental Health Services
(CAMHS)**

Introduction

Children have to be helped to learn how to behave. By setting limits and rules, we help children to learn the right way to behave and what is unacceptable behaviour. Research tells us that children who have clear, consistent rules are calmer, feel more secure and eventually learn to control their behaviour themselves. Remember, everybody who looks after the child (mother, father, grandparents, and so on) should be using the same rules and being consistent. If your child tests the rules, do not take it personally. They are not getting at you. It is just that doing what they want is more appealing.

Setting the scene

What rules and limits should be:

- Do not make rules for **everything**, just the most important behaviours
- Limits and rules should be fair and suitable to the child's age. For example, do not expect children to do chores without being reminded, or your four-year old to wash dishes, or your eight-year old to be responsible for their younger brother or sister
- Use warnings and reminders. If you want your child to stop playing and get ready for bed, start to prepare them in advance. Tell them they have 10 minutes to finish playing before you ask them to stop.

Using commands:

- Use a calm voice when giving commands. Do not shout or threaten. Your child needs to see that you are in control of yourself, them and the situation
- Give one command at a time
- Make sure that your child is looking at you when you speak. This means that they will hear you properly
- Be sure your child has understood your command. Ask them to repeat it back to you if there is **any** doubt

- When you give a command, tell your child what you would like them to do, rather than what you do **not** want them to do. For example, use 'please speak quietly', rather than 'don't shout'
- Only ask once before acting.

Use praise and encouragement:

- Tell your child how they will be rewarded when they have completed what you have asked them to do. For example: "**When** you have picked up your toys, **then** you can go out and play."
- If you are asking your child to stop doing something, ask them what they could do instead. If they cannot tell you, offer some suggestions
- Praise your child as **soon** as he/she begins to do what you have asked.

Helping your child accept limits

Be consistent and prepared:

- If you have made a rule, make sure you stick to it
- Stick to the same rules everyday and every time, regardless of how you feel
- Be prepared for the fact that every child will test his/her parents, to see if they will give in
- Praise, praise, praise and praise again. As soon as your child starts to comply, praise.

Try to avoid unnecessary problems:

- If a child is becoming angry, ignore the anger, but try to divert their attention to other activities
- Avoid arguments. Once you have set a limit, do not negotiate and do not respond to any attempts to make you change your mind

- Ignore any repetitive questions or comments like: “Why, why...”
- Ignore inappropriate responses, like: “It’s not fair”, “I hate you”, or looking sullen or muttering under their breath. If they are doing what you ask, commenting on these minor actions is unhelpful and will probably make them stop doing what you want.

Look out for your own feelings:

- If you are becoming frustrated, upset or angry, go away for five minutes to calm down. Once calm, return to the situation and repeat your request
- Do not tell or show your child that you are finding it hard to cope.

Remember:

Limits are the tools which help you teach children what behaviour is not acceptable. Be clear and fair when you set limits, but once you have decided on what they are, make sure everybody sticks to them. If you stick to the tips above, your children should have a lot less difficulty accepting your limits.

Using discipline the right way

Parents often need to use consequences (sometimes called discipline or punishment) when children fail to comply with their requests. Unfortunately, punishment is often the first strategy used by parents to deal with misbehaviour. Consequences should be used sparingly and to back up praise, rewards and requests, never on their own.

These strategies should be carefully used and aimed at helping the child learn self-control. They should not be used to express the parent’s own anger, frustration or hurt. If punishments are agreed in advance, they can be used before both you and your child become angry. Actual punishments should be used for serious behaviours that **must** be obeyed. Much behaviour can simply be ignored. Your child will often act in a predictable way and this can make it easier to be prepared if you think ahead.

Examples of consequences:

Removal of privileges

This can include not being allowed to watch a favourite TV programme or to play on the computer, not having a chance to go out to play or no sweets.

Ignoring the child's behaviour

Behaviours such as backchat, gestures, sulking, making noises/faces, spitting, swearing, nail biting and hurtful comments are good examples of behaviours you can ignore. They may even become worse if you pay attention.

Time out

Being removed from the room for a short period to calm down.

Choosing the correct consequences:

- Decide in advance with your child what consequences you will use. This helps your child know what to expect. All adults looking after your child should use the same consequences
- Use only one consequence for each behaviour
- Consequences should not be harsh and excessive (e.g. smacking, insults, intimidation). Harsh punishments cause children to become angry and can damage your relationship
- Consequences must be short. Do not ground a child for one week or "until you behave." Grounding them for one night will give them the opportunity to learn to act on your instructions
- You must be able to live with the consequences. For example, if you ban the child from his favourite computer games for a whole week, he/she will be extremely bored and is likely to pester you constantly. This may make you more likely to give in, which you must avoid as this will encourage your child to pester you again in the future
- Be consistent. If you use a consequence for a behaviour one day, you must use it the next day and so on.

Using consequences

- Always give the child one warning before you use a consequence. You should not give more than one warning
- Consequences should follow immediately after the misbehaviour
- Always give consequences when you are calm. If you become angry, go away for five minutes, calm down and then provide the consequence
- Do not use threats (e.g. “I’m going to throw away all your toys”). Empty threats teach your child that you do not mean what you say and they are likely to ignore your threats in the future. Some threats such as: “I’ll put you into a home” or “you’ll be the death of me” are untrue and can be extremely harmful and frightening for your child.

Effective ignoring

- Be aware of when your child is about to behave badly and be ready to ignore them
- Avoid eye contact with your child, when you are ignoring the misbehaviour
- Do not talk to or hug your child when they are misbehaving, even if they try very hard to get your attention
- Be prepared that their tantrums or other behaviour may get worse at first, as they try to get you to pay attention to them
- Do not give attention to the child until he/she has completely stopped the behaviour
- Once the behaviour has stopped, **immediately** give attention to the child.

Using time-out

Time-out is a useful and fast-working technique, but it is important to apply it in the correct way. If you are at all unsure, find yourself

getting into major battles or do not fully understand the following points, you must speak to a professional, such as your health visitor, before using time-out.

When and how to use time-out:

- Time-out should only be used for extreme behaviour, such as physical aggression
- Time-out should be short, no more than five minutes
- Your child should be told in advance what you will use time-out for, where he/she will be sent and how long for.

How to use time-out:

- Choose a place for time-out that is safe and preferably boring. The child could be sat on a chair in the hall, or sent to a safe room. Try to avoid their own bedroom
- Use time-out immediately when aggression occurs
- If the child is having a tantrum or is continuing to be aggressive, you should expect them to be calm and quiet for one minute (two minutes for children older than six years) before they are allowed to return from the time-out room. If the child leaves the timeout room before the time is up, or they are still aggressive, do not speak to them. Simply guide them back to the time-out space
- Do not speak to the child when they are in time-out.

Absolute rules:

- **Never** lock the child in a room
- **Never** use time-out if the child becomes frightened.

Finally

Children learn good behaviour from the way adults set limits and rules and praise them when they get it right.

Always use praise and reward first, but it is also important to have clear limits that don't change day to day or situation to situation or person to person. We can help children accept limits, if we set them fairly and enforce them calmly.



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