Limit Setting

Limits teach children that we respect ourselves, our surroundings, and other people. During the toddler years, "misbehavior" is usually rooted in normal development, experimenting, or testing limits. Children want to see what will happen next or what your reaction might be.

Young children need age-appropriate limits and a loving approach to discipline to ensure safety and support the development of self-control. Learning self-control begins at birth and continues to develop throughout childhood, emerging between 3 and 4 years old. Young children learn self-control through interactions with peers and with guidance from parents, teachers, and other loving adults.

1. The power of prevention: Heading off misbehavior

- **Be consistent.** Setting and enforcing clear, age-appropriate rules is key to helping children learn to make good choices. If every time a child throws a toy it gets taken away, he quickly learns not to throw toys. But when the rules keep changing, it is confusing for young children to know which rules they can count on.

- **Offer tools to help her cope with waiting.**
  Need 10 minutes to fold some clothes? Set a kitchen timer. This helps your child feel more in control and therefore better able to cope.

- **Help with daily transitions.** For example, if you notice your child has a hard time dealing with transitions, such as going from lunch to nap, you can give him a warning 5 minutes before it’s time to change activities. It is also helpful to establish a routine that helps him make the change, such as starting a favorite book that you finish when he wakes up.

- **Offer choices to give your child a sense of (age-appropriate) control.** Ask, "Do you want the blue or red cup?" or, "Do you want to brush your teeth before or after your story?" Avoid asking questions when no choice is actually being offered, for example: say "It is time to get in the bath" versus "Do you want to get in the bath?" Or, say "Your job is to put all the blocks back in the box", versus "Can you clean up your toys?"

- **Be matter-of-fact and use simple language.**
  Children are very sensitive to your words and tone. Taking the emotion out of limit setting helps children focus on the choice they have to make and not on the anger of the other person or feeling badly about themselves.
• Look for ways to help your child practice self-control. Turn-taking games can help children learn to wait and control their impulses. Take turns hitting a soft foam ball off a tee. Have each of you choose an instrument to play and set an egg-timer for 1 minute. When the timer goes off, switch instruments and set the timer again.

2 How can I set effective limits for my child?

• Decide if setting a limit is necessary, also known as “choosing your battles.” It’s good to know how and when to avoid power struggles. Get clear on what is important and where you can be flexible. For example, can you live with an outfit that doesn’t match, if your child wants to choose her own shirt? The idea is to think about your child’s desire to do things for herself and build in ways to meet those needs.

• Stay calm and present in the face of a tantrum. When a child is having a hard time, he needs you to be his rock. If you have a big reaction (frowning, shouting, getting upset), your child is likely to get even more riled up, making it harder for him to calm down.

• Set your limit with as little emotion (and as few words) as possible. The more matter-of-fact you can be, the better. Talk in a low, steady voice and be aware of the nonverbal messages you’re sending with your facial expression and body language. Using a kind and compassionate tone can be calming to your child. And, just as important, it is also a way to soothe yourself during a stressful time.

• Validate your child’s feelings and perspective: Say, for instance, “You really wanted another cookie. Cookies are so tasty, and you are upset that you can just have one.” If you skip this step, your child is likely to dial up her reaction to show you just how much she wants another cookie. Skipping this step and going straight to reassurance (“You’ll be fine—you’ll have another cookie after dinner”) may just fuel the protest.

• Honor your child’s feelings while holding the limit. Your child’s feelings are not right or wrong. It is how feelings get expressed that can be problematic, such as hitting when angry. You can make space for feelings (“I see that you are upset.”), while putting limits on behavior (“I will stop you from hitting.”). This can be done calmly and without passing judgment or shaming the child.

It’s a toddler’s job to push and protest limits. But gradually they will build internal discipline, the ability to delay gratification, and, over time, develop self-regulation and self-control. You—and your firm, kind limits—help to make this happen.