

Boundaries and Expectations Make Life More Manageable for Parents and Kids

There are three ways to get something done: do it yourself, employ someone to do it, or forbid your children from doing it. —Monta Henrichs Crane, editor of Along the Way: An Anthology of Life's Journey in Poetry and Prose

Kids frequently seem to want to do exactly the *opposite* of what their parents tell them. The reality is that young people of all ages will actually *thrive* if their parents set healthy limits, have clear expectations for behavior, and enforce boundaries and consequences consistently. This also makes life more rewarding for parents because children learn that challenging and “bucking the system” aren’t effective ways of negotiating.

Here are tips for establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries and expectations for your children:

Try it...

For parents with children of all ages

- Remember that children need a balance of loving, unconditional support and clear, reasonable boundaries *and* expectations to guide their behavior.

For parents with children ages birth to 5

- Set clear, positive rules for home, such as “Use your ‘walking feet’ indoors,” “Gentle petting is nice for the cats, but pulling their tails is not okay,” and “Food is for eating, not throwing.”
- Offer positive comments and praise when children behave in desirable ways. Reinforcing positive behavior can reduce the need for correction.
- Talk with caregivers about how they will monitor and correct your children’s behavior. Spend time observing your children’s interactions in childcare settings to develop a sense of their comfort levels with their caregivers.
- Allow your kids to cry when they are upset; it’s a normal reaction. However, don’t let them hit, bite, or otherwise hurt you or anyone else. If children become physically aggressive, remove them from the situation.

For parents with children ages 6 - 9

- When things become heated and your child is upset, offer behavior choices you can live with, such as “You may stop yelling and we can talk, or you can go to your room and yell while I go outside.”
- Praise your child for using a positive decision-making process, such as listing the pros and cons of a set of choices.

For parents with children ages 10 - 15

- Start early with conversations about alcohol, drugs, and sex. This way you can make sure they’ve been given accurate information when they start talking about these subjects with other kids. Work

together with your children to establish boundaries and expectations they can internalize. Share your reasons for certain limits and also ask what they think is fair and appropriate.

- Be willing to be the bad guy. Sometimes kids want to be able to blame their parents for things that make them look uncool (e.g., “My parents will kill me if I don’t study for this test”).
- Parents often hear a variation on “Why can’t you just be cool like so-and-so’s parents?” It’s hard to bear the brunt of your kids’ anger or disappointment, but it’s a normal, necessary part of parenting. Your kids need you to monitor their behavior and help them develop the commonsense to eventually monitor it themselves.
- Negotiating curfews is an important boundary issue for parents and children in this age group. For additional support, see [Parenting Matters—Curfews](#) on MVParents.com.

For parents with children ages 16 - 18

- Build a family support network. Be intentional about inviting the parents of your teens’ friends to join you in activities related to your teens’ activities. Talk to each other about your boundaries and expectations for your teens’ activities, including prom, sporting events, dating, driving, and so on.
- Start with the assumption that you and your kids both have their best interests at heart (but don’t assume they’ll be able to keep in mind *your* best interests). Your teens most likely want to lead happy, successful lives, but their ideas may differ from yours about *what* that means. So talk regularly. If you both share an understanding of what’s important, you’ll come to greater agreement over appropriate and acceptable behavior.
- Peer connections are especially important to young people at this age, and they should be important to you as well. It’s great to be able to call a likeminded fellow parent and say, “Hey, what do you think about...?” You don’t always have to agree with them, of course, but you’ll gain more accurate information from other parents if your teenager tells you, “All my friends get to do it!”
- Talk with your teen about what the consequences should be if an incident occurs. Ask your teen to write down the consequences in order to give her or him a deeper sense of ownership.

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