

Why a developing child needs *Boundaries*

Today, many households and classrooms have "mini-democracies" where a children's voices or opinion is equal to those of their parents/teachers. In some cases, the child's voice even takes over, while in other families/classrooms, certain parents/teachers will even fully sacrifice their own needs to make a child happy. In this article we are going to have a look at why developing children need boundaries and structure (created by parents and teachers - the adults)



In today's day, tables have turned from focusing on children's behaviour (in previous generations) to focusing on children's emotions (today). Another phenomenon that is evident is the exponential rise in anxiety disorders in children and teens. Although it is extremely important for children's emotions to be heard and validated, a parent/teacher still needs to be in charge to create a secure and stable environment for kids. In particular, parents/teachers are responsible for setting boundaries in the household/classroom, in order to create an environment where children can be heard, but also encouraged to develop patience, self-awareness, and so on.

K Pozatek (Master of Social Work) highlights a couple of reasons why parents/teachers need to be "in charge" of boundary-setting in order to set the tone for a child's emotional development:

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1. Parental/classroom boundaries allow kids to feel safe.

Secure boundaries set by the grown up (not negotiated by the child) reduce anxiety. Rules and routines like activity times, meal times, bed times, homework time, chores, and screen time — that are set and monitored by the adult — create predictability in a child's life. Predictability reduces uncertainty, and that reduces anxiety (often the root of emotional outbursts).

Parents/teachers should not value a child's self-expression over a child's sense of security. Setting boundaries doesn't make you mean or unfair, even if the child says that to you at the time, out of anger. When a child tries to negotiate a later bed time or change in structure at school, this comes at a cost of the child's sense of security because it allows the child to feel he or she has more power than the adult.

2. Children have undeveloped prefrontal lobes.

In other words, a child's brain is not fully developed, and hence should not be given decision-making power over adults. According to child developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, "magical thinking" predominates in children aged two to seven. This "magical thinking" is what makes children amazing and so full of wonder. But it also suggests that young children are not equipped to be in charge of big decisions — beyond choosing peanut butter and jelly or grilled cheese.

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NO

School-aged children from eight to eleven years of age are largely concrete in their thinking. This is why elementary kids love rules and often like the world to be black and white. After all, structure ensures predictability and security. It is only after age 12 that children begin to develop more abstract and nuanced thinking. This is why adolescence is a more appropriate time to experiment with rules and limits. Yet parents/teachers still need to be “in charge” of setting boundaries with children, as they are still developing the prefrontal controls around impulsivity, decision making, and problem-solving (never mind all the hormonal shifts!).

Even as we know more about brain development, we seem to have become less attuned to thinking about children's unique developmental stage, and what is an appropriate level of choice for them to have. Many parents/teachers today negotiate with their five year-olds as if they are mini-adults; thinking kids understand all the gradations of why rules change and shift.

3. Parental limits disrupt narcissism and entitlement.

For many families, a child's emotions, needs and desires can run the parent's whole day rather than the other way around. Narcissism is normal, and is developmentally appropriate in small children.

Yet unless the early-development narcissism is eventually disrupted, children continue to feel like the world revolves around them and become narcissistic adults. Parental/classroom boundaries allow children to grow up, to understand they can't always get their way and to be more patient and mature. Knowing that there is a limit to how much comfort and pleasure their parents/teachers will provide, children can learn to cope with disappointment; as an added bonus, the mild disappointment often brought about by boundaries can also help children to develop empathy — perhaps for others who have discomfort and disappointment. Understanding the meaning of “limits” allows kids to be more connected to the real world.

Parents/teachers who set boundaries are not trying to make children happy in the moment (though sometimes they are). Rather, more importantly, they are trying to have children develop skills to successfully launch into the world at 18. So the next time you are acquiescing your parental/teacher authority, please remember, it is not helping him or her in the long-term.

Setting Boundaries as parents and teachers: The Earlier the Better

The thing that's happening when a child hears “No” is that they're learning boundaries. Boundaries are important for young kids to learn from parents/teachers because they're the first stepping stone in how an individual gradually learns to abide by the vast set of written and unwritten rules that make up modern society.

The boundaries learned at home and in the classroom (early in life) are the first exposure a child has to the world as it exists outside the home and classroom setting, and learning boundaries early enables children to integrate themselves more easily into the various social situations they encounter as they grow and mature. First at home, then at school and then out in the world—this is the basic progression of an individual's experience with boundaries, and each step builds progressively on the one before it.

Without adequate and reasonable exposure to rules and boundaries at home, a child will have a hard time with the rules and boundaries they encounter at school. And if they aren't exposed to boundaries at school, then they are less likely to be successful in navigating the rules and boundaries they encounter when they eventually enter society at large. For parents and teachers, the key to setting boundaries is not so much in actually saying “No.” It's knowing how to say “No.”

Kids eventually grow up and leave the nest – that's the cycle of life. To adequately prepare for life as an adult, kids need to have a solid understanding of rules and consequences. Because that's how society works. Out in the world, we call rules laws (and everyone knows they come with serious consequences). In the workforce, we call rules company procedures and the consequences can be anything from losing a job to lack of career advancement to possibly not getting a job in the first place. It's the parent's and teacher's job to give kids their first experience with these concepts so that they can translate them into practical terms when they grow up.

The earlier parents and teachers start creating firm and loving rules and consequences, the better off the child will be. Kids who have no concept of firm boundaries will have a difficult time adjusting to their settings and to life when they find out that some rules can't be broken and some consequences are non-negotiable. However, kids who have a solid understanding of these life fundamentals will have a good chance at successfully negotiating the wonderful challenges and opportunities that life presents every day.