

## The Need for Limits to the Limits

Children need limits. As they grow and develop, children need to understand that they can't always act on their feelings and that they can't always do what they may want to do at any one moment in time. As much as we value children's autonomy, they do need some rules and structure in their lives.

Why do children need limits, rules, and structure? It turns out they need limits and structure not for our sake but for theirs. There are times in children's development when they feel quite powerful. As they develop the ability to walk, they may feel they have the power to go anywhere they want and to "get into" anything they want. As they develop the ability to express themselves with words, they may feel they have the power to say anything they want, to anybody they want. This is certainly the case when they learn the power of the word, no. But feeling all-powerful can be scary at times because we aren't always in control of the power at our disposal. Children need limits and structure because it keeps them from feeling as if the world might spin out of their control because they are not yet capable of controlling their own power.

But there also needs to be limits to the limits. This is the delicate balance that needs to be reached by parents in the home and teachers in the classroom. The toddler who is just finding her walking legs can't be allowed to wander into the street just because that is where she wants to go but at the same time she does need the freedom to exercise her newly developed walking ability. If she is always restrained at the first indication of her desire to move, then she won't have the opportunity to grow as a walker, to learn what it takes to walk upstairs, walk quickly, and to run.

Similarly, the emerging talker will need to learn that talking with people also involves listening, that certain words may not be appropriate in all contexts, and that sometimes you can't express what you are thinking simply because you want to express it. But the child who is always told to stop talking or is never allowed to express her feelings may not have the opportunity to increase her vocabulary, master the complexity of the language system, and may not learn that it can be a good thing to share what you are feeling inside with people in your life.

It's not easy for a parent or teacher to find the right balance between limits and freedom. In fact, the balance can be different for individual children and can change from situation to situation. Finding the balance requires the parent or teacher to be aware of her own actions and motivations. Are the limits being imposed for my own sake or are they necessary for the benefit of the child? Are the limits I am setting too restrictive for the current circumstances? Can I modify the current circumstances so that fewer restrictions are necessary? For example, can I move some of the furniture out of the room so that my toddler can explore more freely and I can worry less about the sharp corners of the coffee table? There is no simple formula for finding the balance and sometimes the child won't like the limits we set and sometimes we the parent or teacher won't like the results of the freedom we have given a child. We just have to keep working towards finding the balance.

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