



Attachment and limit setting

The first year of a child's life involves the baby letting the parent know when they need their support, comfort and love. This can be very demanding on a parent's energy and time but is a relatively straightforward exchange between children and their parents. The exchange creates the basis for the child forming a secure attachment to the adults who care for them.

However, the relationship and communication become more complicated when a young child wants to take more control as they become toddlers.

This phase involves a parent being able to set reasonable limits on the child's demands, for example when a child wants a specific object or food, or to have their own way. At these times parents need to set limits while being able to offer the emotional support young children often need when they become frustrated and upset.

Limit setting and boundaries can be a complicated area for parents and their children. Sometimes parents feel concerned that firm boundaries will damage their children or make their child feel cross, upset or angry, or make the child not like them. On the other hand, some parents forget that boundaries that are too firm can be frightening for the child. Boundaries that are too firm may lead to the child doing what they are told but can get in the way of children developing their own minds and identities. Parents need to support children to develop their own minds so they are able to understand what are acceptable ways to behave. Supporting children in this way leads to positive cycles of communication developing between children and parents.

Appropriate, consistent and firm boundaries, that match a child's developmental stage, are important for children's social and emotional development because:

- knowledge of boundaries and rules helps children to feel safe and guide their behaviour
- boundaries help children learn to regulate aggression and develop self-control
- they help children to understand that it is not okay to hurt people or treat them disrespectfully
- they help children to develop respect and thoughtfulness towards others
- receiving appropriate, consistent and firm boundaries helps children to mature so they can respect the rules and limits of the outside world such as in nursery, school, and later in work and social life
- they help them to learn that there are consequences for behaving in unacceptable ways.



Attachment and setting boundaries

There are various ways in which parents can set boundaries, establish rules and encourage a child to move towards acceptable ways of behaviour. Here are a few examples.

- Parents can reward good behaviour. Firstly, they can notice what their child is doing that is positive and then they can praise the behaviour and show pleasure and pride in their child. When the child knows the parents are pleased with what they have done, they are more likely to repeat this positive behaviour. Children love to please their parents. As children get older, it can sometimes help to reinforce positive behaviour by offering your child a reward to show that they have earned this as a consequence of their behaviour.
- Babies and children are trying out new behaviours all the time. Some of these will be behaviours that parents consider to be 'bad' or 'naughty'. Children have a lot to learn about the world around them and parents need to help children to learn and understand what is dangerous or not socially acceptable, such as touching something hot, climbing on furniture and throwing toys.
- Parents can talk to children in a way that encourages children to think about what they have done, and to understand that there are consequences. However, explanations need to be introduced gradually as the child's ability to understand develops.
- Sometimes children may not want to do something because they are feeling tired, fed up or hungry. Sometimes it may be helpful to name the child's feelings, for example 'I know you are tired and want to stay at home but we have to go and pick your sister up from school.' Younger children may need distractions and comfort.

There is an additional benefit to helping children to think and reflect – it will help the child's brain development so that the child will eventually learn to think twice and anticipate consequences before behaving impulsively.