

Setting Limits by Kathryn Kvals: What are limits?

Limits tell your family under what condition you are willing or unwilling to do something. They tell your family where you "draw the line." They tell them what you will or will not tolerate. Their purpose is to take care of you. Limits are not designed to control or manipulate someone else's behavior. Here are three examples:

Example 1. A mother was playing basketball with her two teenage sons. The boys were getting competitive and soon the game wasn't fun. Mother announced, "It is not fun for me when you two fight. When you are ready to make it fun again, come and get me. I'd love to play again."

Example 2. "Children need you to set limits so that they can recognize and respect other people's limits." I was holding hands roller-skating with my daughter. She said in a very demanding tone of voice, "Skate faster!" This wasn't the first time I had noticed that she was being demanding so I said, "I am unwilling to have you talk like that to me. It makes me feel like not cooperating with you and if you continue, I will skate by myself."

Example 3. A daughter asked her mother to take her to the video store and rent her a movie. Her daughter had already spent her allowance that week. Mom said, "I'd be willing to take you to the video store but, I am unwilling to rent you a movie."

Limits give others important information about you to help them know what they can or cannot expect from you. They are about you. Not about criticizing someone else's behavior or about trying to make them act in a certain way.

Why do children need limits?

- Children need you to set limits so that they can recognize and respect other people's limits.
- Limits provide a sense of security. When children don't know your limits they feel lost in an abyss. They feel confused and sometimes literally bounce around trying to find some.
- Limits make children feel like we care about them. Children who are raised without limits often feel abandoned.

Children need limits to learn how to deal with conflict. What happens when someone tells me I have overstepped his or her limits? What happens when someone disrespects mine?

- Children need limits to help them define themselves. They help them clarify their own limits because they have seen your model.
- Limits help them to learn what is socially acceptable and what is not.
- Children need to learn that if they go past a certain point, there will be consequences. Some of them may be serious.
- What issues need limits? You may want to set limits about the use of your belongings, TV watching, bedtime, your time, the use of profanity, mealtime, chores, care and feeding of pets. This is not a conclusive list. Make a list of important issues for you. How do we know when our limits are being violated? The best clue to determine whether or not your limits are being violated is by being in touch with your feelings.

If any of the following feelings sound familiar you know your limits are being dishonored. Or that you are not being clear about them.

Anger, resentment, imposition, smothered, taken advantage of, abused, like you are pulling more than your fair share of the weight, unappreciated, like you are being divided between two people you love, taken for granted, a child taxi cab driver, wondering what about me? Why do we have a difficult time setting limits?

Our ability to set and follow through with limit setting will be largely determined by how you were parented as a child. If you were in any of the following situations, setting limits may be difficult for you.

- Not having any limits as a child, being unsupervised
- Being told messages like, "Don't make waves," "Children are to be seen and not heard" "You are being selfish."
- If you were told it wasn't "nice" to assert yourself
- If there was abuse in home either mental, physical, emotional, sexual, drug and alcohol or work.
- If there was someone in your family that you had to give up your needs for because they were sick or disabled.
- If intimidation was used to motivate you.

Sometimes we don't set limits because we don't feel we deserve them. Or we feel guilty about our own actions such as, working too much or getting a divorce. What we do instead of setting limits? We often choose one of the following behaviors rather than setting limits because we are afraid of creating conflict. We are afraid the other person will get angry or leave us, or reject us. We may even feel that what we say or do will not make a difference anyway. Instead of directly setting limits we sometimes indirectly handle these situations by:

- Denial (Acting or pretending as though it didn't happen)
- Ignore it and hope it'll go away
- Talk yourself out of how you are feeling (I shouldn't feel that way because ...)
- Making excuses for the other person's behavior (He only said that because he was tired.) Ruminating about the issue (Going over and over the event in your mind, trying to make sense of it)
- Blame someone else
- Blame yourself (if I had only done ... he wouldn't act this way.)
- Getting even
- Pretending that you don't care
- Withholding your love or your communication.

What can we expect when we start setting limits? When you first start setting limits, you can expect that your child's behavior will get worse. They will test you. They will try everything in their power to get you to go back to the way you used to be. So, make sure your seat belt is fastened. You may be going for a ride!
Steps for setting limits

1. Honor your feelings. Remember feelings are neither right or wrong. They just are.
2. Get clear about what you want. What you are and are not willing to do
3. Present the information to your family member using an "I" statement. For example, "I am unwilling to wash clothes that are not in the hamper." There should be no blame, shame, guilt, exaggerations or complaining. Do this step as soon as possible to prevent an unnecessary build up of resentment
4. Be ready to "stick to your guns." Be consistent and follow through.

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