



Child Development: Setting And Negotiating Limits

Rules are a part of life for all of us—children and adults. We need rules in order for society to function. Rules of safety and values are embedded into our daily lives.

Rules that set limits can help make children safe. Of course, this is only true if there are responsible adults who follow through and enforce those limits. Children usually know when they are doing something that is dangerous or ethically questionable. When an adult intervenes, the child learns that their immediate world is truly a place that can be trusted.

Through this process of:

- Adults setting limits and expectations
- Children testing those limits
- Adults re-enforcing limits...

...**children get to practice and master development stages** like impulse control and self-esteem. The process of setting limits also helps children become contributing members of society. Because limits have to do with both safety *and* values, setting limits and expectations can help develop a conscience in young children.

Adults don't always like having rules!

As adults, we are often faced with rules we think unfair or unnecessary. Maybe this happens at our jobs, or in the course of our day when we interact with government or private businesses. We don't always like the rules that we are suppose to follow, and often seek out ways of changing those rules. This can vary from legislative action (when those rules are actually laws) to discussing and proposing alternate solutions. *And we may, on occasion, decide to not follow certain rules.*

It should come as no surprise to us that children, just like adults, have a complicated relationship with rules. A child will feel a similar sense of frustration to an adult when confronted with a rule they think is unfair. But as adults, we have more knowledge (and savvy) about negotiating rules.

Negotiating about rules is a learned skill. Therefore, when teaching children the importance of setting and following limits, we must also teach how to discuss and change rules. This will be different depending on the age and maturity level of your child, but it's important to remember that rules *can and sometimes should be changed, as circumstances change.*

Being flexible about rules doesn't mean being wishy-washy. Having no rules, or allowing children to pick and choose which rules they follow, is not the goal. Rather, try to use a process in which you revisit rules and allow your children to be part of the process of designing and re-negotiating those rules—when ever possible.



Child Development: Setting And Negotiating Limits

For instance, imagine that your child's response to a rule is—"that's not fair!" Instead of responding, "Life's not fair: it's a rule, just do it," you can say, *"Well, here is why [not following that rule] would be a problem for me. If you can think of a way to avoid that problem, then maybe we can figure out a new rule."*

It's also important to remember that children do, in fact, *like* following rules! Now, that doesn't mean they won't whine and protest—but the sense of mastery and esteem they feel when they follow a rule is very real.

For more tips, or if you need more information or would like to talk to someone:
In Washington State: Call the Family Help Line at 1-800-932-HOPE
Outside of Washington State: contact your local Circle of Parents agency at
www.circleofparents.org