

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet: Handling the Situation : **Setting Boundaries**

It is part of good parenting to set and enforce reasonable boundaries.

Boundaries help young people to develop self-control, to be part of our society, and to feel cared for and safe. They also help parents look after themselves and other family members.

What are boundaries?

Boundaries are guidelines between people about suitable behaviour and responsibilities.

Boundaries should be clear and reasonable. They need to be consistent. There must be consequences for not respecting them.

Boundaries are unique to each family. They change with circumstances. As young people mature, they can become more involved in the setting of boundaries to suit their new levels of independence.

Setting and keeping boundaries can be difficult with an adolescent, because they may be challenging parental authority and wanting independence. New skills may be needed to negotiate good working boundaries with young people.

Examples of boundaries

Australian families often have boundaries about:

- How to treat other family members
- Going out – where, when, with whom and how often?
- Driving young people around or use of cars
- Knowing where young people are when they are out
- Having guests in the house
- Who pays for what?
- Sharing housework
- Use of telephones or internet
- Smoking or using drugs in the house
- Anti-social or illegal behaviour

Boundaries are often simply understood, rather than spelled out. It is when problem behaviour arises that it becomes necessary to make them clear, and the consequences for breaking them, clearer.

Where there are two parents, it is common to have different views about boundaries. Parents must work together to find a reasonable and fair approach that they both can accept and enforce.

What are good boundaries?

Good boundaries are those that are fair and reasonable and that are appropriate for the age and maturity of the young person. As young people mature, there can be more freedom, but there should also be age-appropriate responsibilities.

If you have very little control, and your child's behaviour is fairly extreme, it is better to have only a few rules. Make these the most important ones, for example, safety of family members or no drugs in the house. Ensure that your young person clearly understands these rules and the reasons for them.

Setting boundaries

Try to negotiate boundaries with the young person, at a calm and relaxed time. They are more likely to respect a decision they have been involved in making. Give them options for rules and consequences.

When deciding on a boundary, consider whether it is really necessary. If they don't do this, will it really matter? Will an argument be worth it? Can I really enforce it? Sometimes it may be more appropriate to change your expectations.

Your child may say their friends' parents let them do things you will not. You can check if you like, but in the end you make a decision based on your values. That is reasonable.

Take into account how honest and reliable the young person is in your experience.

Sometimes it is okay to have different rules for different members of the family. This may be appropriate taking into account their different ages or stages of development.

Think about whether you are enabling problem behaviour; e.g. do you help them afford drugs by not asking them to pay board?

Make sure the boundary is enforceable. Think about what consequences you can have if it is not respected (see below).

Communicate the boundary

Sometimes you do not realise a boundary is there until it is crossed.

Try not to react in anger the first time. Find a calm moment to make it clear what the boundary is, and what the consequences will be if it is not respected in future.

If you are not speaking, a well-worded letter can help.

Avoid power struggles

Sometimes boundaries become the focus of a power struggle between the child and the parents. The young person refuses to comply. The parents get angry and insist. The focus has become 'who is in charge here?'

Everyone loses in a power struggle, so it is important to try to avoid them. Make sure the boundary you want to enforce is worthwhile. Try to listen to their request and see if

you can find a middle ground.

Young children are easier to restrict – if they are sent to their room, they will usually stay there. Adolescents are less likely to obey. You can only control your behaviour. You can set your boundaries and if they choose to ignore them, you can allow natural consequences to follow.

Be prepared to change

Boundaries should be clear and consistent, but they should also be changed if they are no longer relevant or necessary.

Your influence on your child may reduce as they get older and your approach may need to change. For example, your focus may shift from enforcing rules about when they are home, to other things like not interrupting family members when they do come home, or respecting other rules when they are in the home. You may also need to focus on having positive interactions with them when they are at home.

Consequences

For boundaries to work, there must be consequences if they are not respected.

This means that something will happen if the boundary is crossed. There is not much point in having a rule that they have to be home by a certain time if they learn they can break the rule and nothing happens.

The best consequences are natural consequences of the behaviour – for example, you do not wash clothes that are left on the bedroom floor rather than in the laundry. Another example is the consequence they face if they do not pay a fine on time.

If no natural consequences are likely to occur, you can make a list of all the things you do (or are currently willing to do) for your child and withdraw or refuse one as a consequence. It is best if the consequence has a natural connection to the issue. Aim to make consequences timely and in proportion, not too harsh.

For example, if they are not home at an agreed time, next time they ask you to do something, you may say “you weren’t home when we agreed and so this time, I will not change my own arrangements to drive you somewhere you want to go”. It’s best if it doesn’t come across as ‘tit for tat’, but as a logical and reasonable response to their behaviour.

It can be hard to think of reasonable consequences, especially for someone who is very rebellious or not around much. Try talking to other parents about boundaries and consequences they use. You might find it useful to see a counsellor or youth-family service, especially if you feel you have little or no control.

It is better not to protect them from consequences in the outside world. If they break school rules, let the school deal with it. If they are caught breaking the law, let the police and courts decide.

The consequence helps the young person learn and change their behaviour. Try to let go of your own anger and resentment once the consequence has been enforced.

Consequences are essential to making boundaries work. But positive lessons are more powerful. It is really important to notice and praise their efforts when they do the right thing.



Tips from this Help Sheet

- Boundaries are guidelines between people about suitable behaviour and responsibilities.
- Setting and keeping boundaries can be difficult with an adolescent. Negotiation is important.
- Boundaries should be clear, reasonable and consistent, with consequences for not respecting them.
- If you have very little control, and the behaviour is fairly extreme, it is better to have only a few rules. Make these the most important ones, e.g. safety-related boundaries.
- Make sure the boundary is enforceable. Think about what consequences you can have if it is not respected.
- Make sure the boundary you want to enforce is worthwhile. Try to listen to their request and see if you can find a middle ground.
- The best consequences of a boundary not being respected are the natural consequences of the behaviour.
- Try to notice and praise their efforts when they do the right thing.



Related Help Sheets

- Types of Help Available
- Improving Communication
- Staying Calm



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