



Setting and Protecting your Boundaries

What are boundaries? **Boundaries** are limits people set in order to create a **healthy** sense of personal space. **Boundaries** can be physical or emotional in nature, and they help distinguish the desires, needs, and preferences of one person from another.

Role of Boundaries in Healthy Relationships

Healthy relationships happen when we actively and consistently respect each other's rights and preferences. They are based on equality and mutual respect. They are based on healthy boundaries.

The truth is that one person's boundary cannot make another person change. It may give them good reason to choose to change, but they retain their own "power of choice". We may not like it if they choose not to change, but we would do well to accept that they have a right to choose for themselves.

Our power of choice includes the ability to let others know how their behaviors are impacting us and to offer them a chance to stop the damage to our relationship – before we must build a WALL instead of a boundary. We do this by taking responsibility for **calmly, clearly and consistently communicating** our boundaries.

In a perfect world, everyone communicates their boundaries **calmly and clearly** and those around them **respect their requests** for "appropriate behavior" (and they live happily ever after).

Since we don't live in a perfect world, others sometimes do choose to disregard our boundary requests and the "inappropriate behavior" continues. If this happens, it may be beneficial to *clearly and calmly* restate a boundary request several times over a period of days or weeks. Reminder: Boundaries communicated to your child who is intoxicated may not be "heard" or remembered.

If a boundary is continually ignored, even after repeated requests, then we have a responsibility to ourselves to protect the boundary, not just one time, but every time, from now on. Remember: Actions speak louder than words. Consistency of our actions is the best way to protect a boundary.

Using the Boundary Request Formula (Inform, Request, Inform) plan a boundary request for each of the following scenarios:

When you: _____), I feel _____

Can I ask you to _____ (stop/change) _____ (the behavior)

If you are not willing to _____ (stop/change) _____ (the behavior), I will need to _____ (protective action)

Example:

Inform: When you raise your voice, swear and call me bad names, I feel so hurt and disrespected.

Request: I've asked you several times over the last few weeks to speak in a normal volume when you talk with me and stop swearing and calling me bad names. But nothing has changed.

Inform: From now on, when you raise your voice, swear or call me bad names, I will ask you to leave the house for the evening/remove yourself from the area and go to your room.

Keeping It Positive

In really significant boundary conversations when you are confronting someone about a serious problem (e.g. I'm concerned that your drug use is out of control") it can be helpful to set the tone for the conversation by starting off with positive statements that affirm and validate how important your relationship with your child is to you:

Example:

Jack, I want you to know that the reason I'm bringing this up is because I love you and I am committed to our relationship. I love and value so many things about you and the good times we've shared. In fact, that is why I must talk to you about this.

Protective Action

When first learning about boundaries, parents sometimes confuse the actions needed to protect a boundary with making a choice to punish their child for their actions. It may be helpful to recall that "punishment" is not necessarily the answer and sometimes backfires. Instead, a simple and powerful action for protecting your boundary is: disengage – remove yourself from the situation. In many cases, some variation of "disengage" is enough to communicate the seriousness of your boundary request.

The first time you find yourself communicating your plan to take protective action you may not have had time to decide what you're going to do. In that case, you may just state, calmly, matter-of-factly, "if you're not willing to do this, I'll need to make some decisions about what I'm going to do." That buys you time to think through it and decide on the protective action you will commit to.

Note: Protecting your boundaries is not a way to punish others or manipulate them into complying with your wishes. It is not a sign of disrespect for others' needs. It is a sign of respect for yourself and for the relationship.