



Identifying & Communicating Your Boundaries

How do we know we have a boundary issue that needs addressing?

Some signs that we may need to focus on boundaries are:

Feelings of: depression, fatigue, anxiety, burnout, powerlessness, panic, and extreme anger

Attempting to: keep the peace by putting up with things, trying to control things we cannot control

Problems with: making decisions, defining goals for ourselves, getting things done (because we've devoted ourselves to trying to manage our child's life)

Who benefits from boundary communication?

Behaviors that are unknowingly hurtful, disrespectful, or disturbing to others can emerge from a child who is using substances. In the short-term it may seem easier to keep the peace and not add to the drama that would come from discussing their disturbing behaviors with them. But think about the long-term: What is the likelihood that things will improve if we never share with our child how their behaviors are affecting others in their life? What is the likely long-term effect if we never speak up? Is it possible that our child might mistake our patience and tolerance for acceptance of their behaviors?

Healthy boundaries provide a way for us to respectfully communicate the problems we are experiencing with our child's behaviors and to request alternative behaviors.

Five Steps to establish healthy boundaries:

In order to establish healthy boundaries between yourself and your child (or any other person in your life):

- 1:** Identify the symptoms of your boundaries currently being (or having been) violated or ignored.
- 2:** Take responsibility for your upsets- Identify the irrational or unhealthy thinking and beliefs that have led you to allow your boundaries to be ignored or violated.
- 3:** Identify new, more rational, healthy thinking and beliefs which will encourage you to change your behaviors so that you build healthy boundaries between yourself and your child.
- 4:** Identify new communication skills you will need in order to sustain healthy boundaries between you and your child going forward. The emphasis is on *sustaining* boundaries.

5: Implement your new healthy boundary-building beliefs and behaviors in your life so that your space, privacy, and rights are no longer ignored or violated.

Where to start:

Gain some experience and some confidence with communicating small boundaries before moving on to larger ones. You may wish to practice boundary communication with someone other than your child in order to gain experience and confidence in speaking up for what you expect from them. Whether you start with others or with your child, consider beginning by addressing smaller issues (such as your child not participating in household chores) before tackling larger and more personal issues such as behaviors directly related to substance abuse.

How to communicate a boundary effectively:

Communicating in a direct and honest manner is a critical component to settling boundaries. It is impossible to have a healthy relationship with someone who has no boundaries, and who cannot communicate honestly and directly. Learning how to set boundaries is a necessary step in learning to care for yourself and for others.

Since boundaries are “about the self” and not “about the other”, they are best communicated in the form of “I” statements:

Sample format for communicating boundaries:

Inform: When you do: (YOUR BEHAVIOR) I feel: (MY REACTION)

Request: Can I ask you to (STOP or CHANGE this BEHAVIOR)?

Example: When you don't let me know where you are, I feel very worried about you. I would like it in the future if you could call and tell me you are going to be late.

What to expect when you communicate a boundary:

No matter how skillfully you communicate a boundary, your child may likely see that boundary as an attempt to control behavior and, if this is the case, resistance is to be expected.

Reminder: In the event of a hostile response, your immediate safety is the first priority. Postponing boundary communication may be the best option.

The boundary communication may need to be redelivered, in a calm manner, multiple times, over several days using the “I” statement format.

Reminder: Boundaries communicated to someone who is intoxicated may not be “heard”.

If your child continues to cross a boundary, a further step, in the form of deciding and communicating what action you will take in response to further violations may be required.

