



## Limit Setting

**Introduction to Topic:** Natural consequences by themselves may not be enough to influence or change behavior. While they may not like the consequences, they will likely still be ambivalent about change (it is important to remember that *behaviors make sense*). In other words, for your child the natural consequences may be worth the price of their substance use in the moment.

Limit setting uses the power of reinforcement in a different way; as a way to reduce behaviors. When reinforcers are **taken away** in response to a behavior that is not desirable the behavior grows weaker. Setting limits means creating bright lines for your child so they know what behaviors will receive reinforcement and what behaviors will remove reinforcement. Importantly, it also involves communicating clearly to a child the link between specific behaviors and specific consequences (e.g., “if you do x, y happens”).

Withdrawing reinforcers as a consequence can be more effective than other behavior reducing strategies such as shouting and hitting (which is NEVER recommended). Taking a reinforcer away also allows you to reintroduce it when the behavior you want to see (e.g. the positive opposite or healthy alternative) shows up again.

**Planned Ignoring:** The art of doing nothing sometimes can be a useful strategy. Ignoring gives the least amount of reinforcement possible: nothing. The message of ignoring is that I am not interested in this behavior. (I will not have a conversation with you when you talk to me that way). It does not mean ignoring all behaviors (for example it is not recommended to ignore substance use).

### Important Points for Setting Limits:

- Remember: Behaviors that do not get reinforced occur less often.
- Setting limits helps your child understand their behavior as choice; it is about their **behavior** (not them as a person) and the link between their behavior and consequences.
- Setting Limits is not just being tough. It is one piece of a bigger picture that includes both staying connected to your child and reinforcing the positive behaviors and communicating clear consequences for the unhealthy behaviors. It may be uncomfortable to do at times, which means checking in with your level of willingness.
- Enabling is reinforcing (e.g., supporting) the behaviors you are looking to decrease.

- Reinforcing the behaviors you want to strengthen and setting-limits for the behaviors you want to reduce is a powerful combination.

### **Important Ingredients for Setting Limits:**

- **Clarity:** let your child know beforehand what will happen if they engage in the behavior you would like them to avoid (conversation strategies are important so working out how you want to deliver the message is important).
- **Consistency:** setting limits is more powerful when everyone is on the same page, the message is clear and the consequences routinely follow the behavior
- **Size:** the consequence should fit the behavior. Save the ‘biggest hammer’ for the big stuff and use smaller consequences for the smaller things. AND... only spell out consequences that you are willing to really put in place. Don’t threaten to “kick them out” unless you are prepared to change the locks on the door as doing so reduces your credibility, something we want to keep intact.

*Material adapted from: The Workshop for Parents & Caregivers Facilitator Training Guide. Partnership for Drug-Free Kids & CMC: Foundation for Change, September 2018, v1.3.*