

Effective Parenting- A Social Worker's Perspective

By: Regina Kearney, LCSW

As a clinician working with children, adolescents and their parents/families for several years, I have noted problems in caregiving that make effective parenting difficult. The two words I would use to summarize these problems: **boundaries** and **consequences**. I have observed that the parents that have the greatest difficulties with their children's behaviors tend to be lacking adequate or appropriate boundaries and/or consequences.

According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, boundaries are unofficial rules about what should not be done and/or limits that define acceptable behavior. Essentially, boundaries are the rules an individual has regarding what they will and will not tolerate when interacting with others. Boundaries are those invisible lines that we all draw to protect our personal space, values, morals, and rights. Being too strict or too lax with provision of boundaries for children can lead to problems. When boundaries are too rigid, there is often a lack of communication between parents and children and the family tends to function in restricted, almost ritualistic ways. Children are not given the opportunity to explore limits and the reason for them. An example of rigid boundaries would be a child that has the same curfew of 7 pm throughout their entire adolescence, until they are 18 years of age.

Boundaries that are too lax result in a blurring of the lines between parent and child, with both of them overinvolved in each other and each person trying to control themselves and one another. An example of lax boundaries would be a child that either has no curfew, or arrives home well after curfew again and again without serious consequences being imposed by their parents. Or a child that is allowed to go to bed at whatever time the parents go to bed, and even sleep with the parents. More often than not, the parents I see in my therapy practice are operating with very diffuse or even nonexistent boundaries. When problems occur with children, parents that are not skilled in enforcing boundaries often struggle with solving these issues. They try reasoning with their child, bribing them, threatening them or lose their tempers and end up cursing and screaming. Yet none of their attempts to gain control of the situation and resolve the problem are successful because those techniques do not enforce any kind of boundary.

Although providing reasons for rules and limits is often essential to boundary-setting, it is not sufficient in itself to enforce those boundaries. Drawing a line in the sand and explaining the reason for drawing that line does not accomplish much if nothing happens when a person crosses the line, again and again. In fact, the line-crosser has now learned that rules and limits are not things that need to be taken seriously. In order for a boundary to be effective, a consequence (oftentimes negative consequences) must follow violation of the boundary and/or rule. For example, removing text messaging or internet privileges when a child breaks their curfew can be an effective consequence. The child is not being *punished*, per say. Instead, a negative consequence is being provided for violation of a boundary. Removal of privileges is not the only means of reinforcing a boundary, in fact; simply saying "no" and sticking to it

can be effective. In other words, not giving in to a child's every demand or tantrum can also help maintain order. In that instance, the consequence is that the child did not get their way by whining or nagging their parents.

Though the concept of providing negative consequences and not giving in to a child's demands may sound simple enough, it can actually be a lot harder to do. Many parents worry that their child will suffer greatly if denied privileges, or will make them suffer through tantrums and emotional scenes. It can be challenging to say "no" or punish boundary violations when it comes to the ones we love, but it is also necessary to maintaining healthy relationships in our lives, and to teaching our children the importance of respecting rules and tolerating disappointment.

This article is the first in a series on effective parenting that will be published on the Freedom From Fear website. Future articles will talk further about boundaries and limit-setting, problem-solving, and dealing with the stresses of parenthood and child-rearing in a fast-paced, technology driven society.

If you have further thoughts or questions on boundaries and consequences when dealing with your children, stay tuned for future articles on this topic, or contact the author:

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