

TEACHING CHILDREN ABOUT BOUNDARIES

DAUPHIN COUNTY MH/ID PROGRAM
FEBRUARY 2018 RESOURCE SHARING

Boundaries are about understanding and respecting our own needs, and being respectful and understanding of the needs of others. For that to work, we need to emphasize helping children develop greater empathy and self-awareness. What we want is for children to start developing that awareness of how others are feeling, and begin using it as a guide for how to behave. We also want to help children get comfortable with stating their own feelings and setting limits, even as they respect others' limits. That takes practice.

Most children start to show concern for others by age 3. Help younger children learn by using social skills coaching in real life situations. For example, asking, "How do you think Mark felt when you took his toy away?" If your child grabs a shy friend, encourage him to think about how his friend might be feeling, and why asking before touching is important. Also ask your child to think about how he feels if his sister won't let him play with her friends or won't share dessert. Then ask how he thinks she'd feel if he did the same. This can give your child a chance to link actions to the feelings they cause.

Help children understand that following rules works both ways.

- ◆ People are in charge of their own bodies and it's not okay to touch them if they don't want you to, *just like it's not okay for someone to touch you in a way you don't like.*
- ◆ Sometimes things that seem fun to you *are not fun for the other person.*
- ◆ Listening when people are talking, especially when they're giving instructions, is how we stay safe and make sure other people are safe, too. *If people aren't listening to you, they won't know what you need or want either.*

Practice Setting Boundaries — Learning how to be more empathetic (able to put yourself in someone else's shoes) can be a big help when it comes to social interactions, but it's also equally important to help your child learn to speak up for himself and his boundaries when other children are being pushy, aggressive or thoughtless. Helping your child make a plan for what to do when someone isn't respecting her feelings or boundaries will give your child the chance to practice standing up for herself. There are also situations that may require your child involving an adult. Discuss those with your child. Helping children get comfortable standing up for their boundaries early will help them do so in the future when the stakes can be higher.

Model Behavior — As parents/caregivers, demonstrate the kinds of behaviors you want your children to imitate. When children hear you checking with your partner to see if they're on the same page before making a decision or asking a friend how they feel (and really listening to their response), they will be more likely to do the same.

Find and Discuss Examples — Make empathy part of the conversation by drawing on your child's favorite media. Talk with them about examples of positive and negative behaviors you see there.

Embrace Diversity — Another key part of instilling empathy is making sure children are interacting with people who are different than themselves on a regular basis. Encourage acceptance of differences by giving your child the opportunity to participate in activities with children from different backgrounds, races and physical abilities who share common interests. This includes opportunities for boys and girls to play and collaborate together as well.

Take your Child's Limits Seriously — Allow them to decide for themselves if, and when, they want to show affection to relatives and family friends. Really listen when your child tells you what is and isn't okay with them and let them know you respect their boundaries.

<https://www.childmind.org/article/teaching-kids-boundaries-empathy>