

Does “drawing a line” build a wall or a boundary?

I have often been asked some form of, “When do I get to just *draw the line* and say no? I get so tired of being understanding. Isn’t there a time when I can just send them to their room when I’ve had it?” Of course saying “no” is an important limit to set. A well-placed “no” will establish a good boundary and uphold your or another’s rights or needs. Children need effective limits—what they can and cannot do—to set a structure in which they will feel safe and cared for. Without limits a child does not learn good boundaries and does not learn respect for others. But a *well-placed* “no” means it is conscious and is determined to be an important limit for the child’s future learning, not a knee-jerk “no” to make life more convenient for you.

The question above indicates that this parent feels it is her right to get the peace and quiet she wants or the cooperation she demands by reprimanding or isolating a child for arguing, being noisy, not answering right away, dawdling—for being a child. Here’s the rub: It is my problem if I am tired, if the refrigerator is empty, if I am stressed from a long day, if the room is a mess with toys, if I have overextended myself, if I want the trash taken out or the dog fed—not my child’s. When it is my problem, it is absolutely appropriate to ask for help with it and to extend appreciation for the help I get. But it is not appropriate to expect and demand that my child take care of my problem and then behave punitively if that demand is not met the way I want.

We all know people whom we might say *don’t have good boundaries*. Many parents use the word boundary when they mean limits. In my mind limits are only one way to establish good boundaries. Boundaries are a psychological separation between one person and another. When boundaries are not clear they become apparent in many different ways – from a person who invades personal, physical space by standing too close, to someone who shares information with you that is inappropriate for the relationship, to a person who tries to step into a role in your life that you do not want them in. Good boundaries create good relationships or as Robert Frost has said, “Good fences make good neighbors.” So how do we teach our children to have good boundaries?

One way is honoring a child’s (no matter how small the child) personal space and things by *modeling* – always knock on your child’s door if it is closed, ask questions like, “May I borrow one of your crayons to write a note?” “I need to change your diaper, shall we do it here or on the changing table?” “Would you mind if I tell your teacher what you just told me?” “I found this piece of paper on the floor. Is it something you want or shall I throw it away?” “No, I don’t have time to do that for you right now. I am doing something very important. Ask me again in a little while.” Another way is by *requiring* good boundaries – “Please always ask me before you borrow anything of mine. Asking is the courteous and respectful thing to do,” “If my door is closed, please knock before you come in just to let me know,” (important to establish these rules between siblings) “I’m talking to someone right now, I’ll answer your questions as soon as I’m done.”

The hardest way to teach boundaries is by *setting* good boundaries. Make sure you do not take care of problems that belong to your child and do not ask your child to take care of problems that belong to you. Don’t jump in to fix or rescue your child from a difficult situation she is in before first supporting her

through finding a solution that works for her. What you think she should do is not necessarily the right solution for her. Responsible behavior develops from the little daily situations when parents allow their children to handle a problem—not by ignoring them or sending them away with the problem, but by supporting them through it to find their own solution rather than the solution the parent might prefer. It is often easier to “just do it myself” or to tell the child what to do. But your child will not learn to take responsibility for herself when you take it for her.

Expecting your child to take care of your problems means placing blame on him when you are tired or frustrated or angry. “You make me so mad” means *You are responsible for my feelings*. Blaming a child for what is not his fault can easily teach a child to blame others for their own problems and not take responsibility for themselves. This is one of the hardest lessons for parents to learn probably because most of us were raised with the expectation of taking care of our parents’ problems. It has always been thought to be our inalienable right as parents to expect our children to do our bidding because they owe it to us—it is not.