

Helping You Navigate Your Journey Through Parenting

Setting Limits and Sticking to Them



BY: KIM DEMARCHI

Parents, have you ever set a limit with your child and then not followed through? The conversation goes something like this:

Child: “Mommy, can I have another piece of candy?”

Mommy: “Okay, but just one more.”

A few minutes later....

Child: “Mommy, may I please, pretty please, just have one last piece of candy?”

Mommy: “No, honey. You’ve had enough today.”

Child: “But, Mommy! I never get to have candy. It was a special treat from my best friend. I really, really want just one more little piece, and then I won’t ask any more, I promise!”

Mommy: “This is the last one! I mean it!”

Or, parents have you ever made a threat and then not followed through?

Dad and child are at the park playing in the sandbox. Child throws sand.

Dad: “If you throw sand one more time, we are leaving the park!”

A few minutes later, child throws sand.

Dad: “I said if you throw sand again, we are leaving! Do you understand?”

Again, the child throws more sand.

Dad: “Did you hear what I said? I’m warning you. If you throw sand one more time, we are really leaving this time!”

Limits are important for a variety of reasons. They are to keep our children safe. They show we care about them. They help children learn what is socially acceptable. They provide a sense of security. They help teach respect. They tell our children under what conditions we are willing or unwilling to do something. Setting limits also helps children learn trust. Children that have parents that do what they say they are going to do learn to trust.

Whatever your place of reference with setting limits, here are four specific steps to assist you in not only setting them, but sticking to them:

- 1. Empathize** with how the child feels. We all have a basic human need to feel heard, understood, validated, etc...
- 2. Pause** and do NOT say “But”
- 3. State the limit** clearly or ask the child what the limit or agreement is
- 4. Give a choice** (5 years or younger) or ask the child what their options might be (5 years or older)

Here is an example of what that might sound like with the above candy scenario:

Scene: You’ve just agreed to let your child have 1 piece of candy that afternoon, but also told her that 1 is the limit.

Child: “I want another piece of candy Mommy.”

Parent: Step 1 Empathize: “I know you want another piece of candy.” Or “It’s fun to have surprise treats every now and then, isn’t it?” Or “I enjoy the sweet taste of candy too.” Or “That was really kind of your friend to give you some candy. I can see you are really enjoying that piece of candy.”



Step 2 Pause: (just be silent for five seconds)

Step 3 State the limit: “You had your 1 piece I said you could have.” Or “When do we usually eat sweet treats?” Or “Do you remember how many I said you could have?”

Step 4 Give a choice: “Would you like to have some carrots or almonds?” Or “Would you like to choose another healthy alternative?” Or “Do you want to put the candy away or do you want me to put it away?”

If these steps aren’t effective the first time, and your child is whining or complaining, go back to step 1 - Empathize. Try your best to be kind, but firm. Your child’s job is to test the limits. Your job as the parent is to set the limits and reiterate those limits again and again; consistency is the key to success.

And remember, do what you say and say what you mean. If that means putting the candy out of reach or leaving the park, make it happen. Your child will benefit and you will be more effective in helping your child become a secure, trusting, and respectful human being.

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