

# Setting Limits with Love

Daniel Benveniste

What's the difference between punishment and discipline? Can I say, "No" and still be a loving parent? How can I cultivate positive self-esteem in my child? Am I bad parent? These are the kinds of questions about which many parents wonder. This article provides a few of the basic principles for setting limits with love. In addition to offering guidance to parents to maintain discipline in the home, it also provides a point of reference for parents to come to their own conclusions about the kinds of questions listed above.

## **Socialization: The Goal of Parenting**

While there are many goals of parenting, psychologically speaking, the goal of parenting is the socialization of the child. A child comes into the world as a bundle of needs and desires. The parents' job is to help satisfy those needs and desires and also to socialize the child so that he or she can learn to get those needs and desires met in a socially appropriate manner. This socialization takes place in the day-to-day tasks of feeding, cleaning, soothing, weaning, toilet training, playing, language acquisition, sex role definition, etc. Becoming socialized means learning how to wait and learning how to effectively obtain what is needed or desired from those within one's world.

In a sense, infants come into the world in an 'unsocialized' state. But with time they grow and develop and through the tasks of feeding, cleaning, weaning and the rest, they learn to tolerate being told "No." "Not now, later." "Not here, there." "Not this way, that way." They learn to wait, learn to find a way to get what they want in relation to others and, in doing so, they become socialized.

Infants are naturally self-absorbed and self-centered but as they grow, we draw them into the world of social relations by delivering to them 'the bad news and the good news.' The bad news is, "You're not the center of the universe!" The good news is, "You're not alone!" And as the child successfully learns to get his/her needs met, he/she begins to become interested and invested in the needs of others, such as family and friends.

## **Some Strategies for Teaching Discipline**

*Time-Out* is a strategy to get oneself under control, to calm down, remember the rules and remember the needs of others. A Time-Out is not an exile to the Arctic! It is not a 'getting rid of the child'. It is a time and place to get oneself under control. Explain it to your child that way and use it in that way.

"You need a Time-Out to get yourself under control."

"I AM UNDER CONTROL!!!" the child screams while flailing about on the floor.

"No, you're not. I'll know you're under control when you can sit in the chair, with your feet on the floor, your hands in your lap and can tell me calmly what happened. Now let me see you get yourself under control."

*Withdrawal of privileges* is a strategy to bring the complexity of a child's life down to a level that is more manageable for the child. If the child cannot play for more than 30

minutes before hitting someone, limit play to 15 minutes of successful play, acknowledge the accomplishment and steadily increase the time frame until the hitting or the threat of hitting occurs again. Then, reduce the time frame back to a more manageable level and let the child reattempt the task and later increase the time frame again. Only provide as much time and stimulation, or as many toys and visitors as the child can successfully handle. If a child cannot play successfully with ten toys, limit the child to three toys and increase the number of toys over time, provided the play continues to be enjoyed successfully. That's the basic idea.

*Alter circumstances to create opportunities for success.* If a child cannot play with a ball without breaking a window, you must either supervise the play or not provide the child with the ball. If a child cannot be left alone without getting into mischief, don't leave him/her alone. Don't leave enthusiastic young children in a room full of delicate antiques. Don't leave children in circumstances that are set-ups for failure. Instead, create opportunities for success.

*Help children to remember the rules.* Sometimes when children break the rules, it is enough to remind them of the rule or, better yet, ask them to tell you what the rule is.

*Make brief statements about the rule and the problem.* Don't lecture children. Keep your message clear, short and sweet.

### **Discipline and Punishment**

Discipline and punishment are not the same. Every social structure, including the family, has its rules. When a rule is broken or a boundary crossed, the child can be punished or disciplined. Forms of punishment include: spanking, beating, whipping, bodily harm, locking the child in a room, public shaming, withholding food, insulting words, etc. Punishment is humiliating, frightening, disrespectful, and demoralizing. It may briefly stop the problematic behavior but it usually creates more problems such as oppositional behavior, a bad parent-child relation, self-destructive behavior, criminal behavior and low self-esteem. Discipline, however, is a skill. Discipline is a way of channeling impulses into socially appropriate avenues in order that the child can learn how to get his/her needs and desires met. Punishment is delivered. Discipline is taught. And when a child learns discipline, he/she develops self-discipline. When a parent teaches discipline he/she is functioning in the role of ambassador to the world. The parent says to the child, "These are the *limits*. These are the *consequences* for crossing them. And I will impose the consequences *consistently* until you are able to learn the rules and, in doing so, become socialized, self-disciplined, personally satisfied and an effective member of society."

### **Setting Limits with Love**

By setting limits with love, you help your children learn your values, become who they are, express their thoughts and feelings, and achieve their goals. The three key tasks to setting limits with love are:

- 1) Setting appropriate limits
- 2) Establishing logical consequences
- 3) Being consistent

### ***1) Setting Appropriate Limits***

To set appropriate limits, ask yourself: What is my child capable of doing? And what are the appropriate expectations that I can have of my child? The goal of parenthood is socialization, and socialization means becoming increasingly autonomous, taking on greater levels of responsibility, eventually assuming adult roles and becoming interdependent. Thus, we can imagine a model of development as a series of concentric circles, sort of like the cross-section of an onion. The circle itself represents the limits for which the child must be responsible and the space within each circle represents a zone of freedom. The circle at the center of the onion is small. It is the mother's arms that hold the baby. There is not a lot of freedom there and not a lot of responsibility either! The next ring is defined by the limits of the crib, the next is the bedroom, then the interior of the home, the perimeter of the yard, the block, the neighborhood, and so on. But we don't give a toddler the freedom or the responsibility to toddle across the street. We don't let a 10-year-old drive the car. And we don't make the teenager stay in the crib. Optimally we want to offer growing children the freedom that they can responsibly handle.

Many child-rearing problems occur when we give children more freedom and responsibility than they can successfully handle or when we don't permit them the freedom and responsibility that they can clearly handle. *Thus, the goal is to make the child's world small enough to be successful in and large enough to be challenging.*

### ***2) Establishing Logical Consequences***

Punishment is a response like a ton of bricks that fall on the child's head when he/she crosses a limit that has been established. Punishment makes the child feel bad about him or herself, develop a sense of low self-esteem, and fear his/her parent. Logical consequences, on the other hand, call attention to the crossing of a limit, and provide the child with the opportunity to reattempt the task in a way that helps the child to be more successful. Consequences should not crush the child's will or creativity. The following are two examples:

Limit: No hitting

Problem: Patrick hit Billy

Consequence: Play session ends, there is a time-out to calm down, the problem and rules about fighting are discussed (BRIEFLY), new solutions are entertained for the problem encountered and there is a return to the play session.

Limit: No toys on the floor

Problem: Tommy's toys are all over the floor, all the time, even though everyone is tripping over them and screaming at Tommy to put them away.

Consequence: Take all but three of Tommy's toys away from him. Invite him to play successfully with them - that is, to use them properly and put them away in his toy box after he has finished playing with them. When he demonstrates an ability to play with the three toys successfully, add three more toys to his toy box with the same expectation. If he can handle it, add three more and so on. When the mess returns, and it probably will, remove the last three toys until he can show you that he can manage them. Later he can try to handle more again. In this way the rings of freedom and responsibility enlarge and shrink according to the abilities of the child, which, of course, change over time.

### ***3) Being Consistent***

By consistently providing your child with limits and consequences, he or she is able to internalize the limits and become a socialized being, a person who functions in the world with limits and boundaries. If you're going to set a limit, be sure to impose a consequence. If you're going to impose a consequence, be sure to be consistent. It makes no sense to be consistent some of the time. Be consistent. Be consistent. Be consistent.

### **The Art of Parenting**

Being a parent is the most important and sometimes the most difficult job in the world. It is a job for which people get the least training, the most blame, and the least credit. Parenting is not a science. It is an art. There is no such thing as a perfect parent or perfect parenting. Parenting in one style may work well with one child and not so well with another. What works with one child this year, may not work so well with the same child next year. Parenting is an endless series of self-corrections. So, do the best you can, give yourself credit for good moments, and don't be too critical of yourself in bad moments. Find ways to nurture yourself, your spouse, and other parents. Call on experts in the field when you encounter difficulties and remember that, in addition to professionals, every parent is a kind of expert! Consult with your friends to get a different perspective and be generous, but humble, with your own suggestions to other parents.

---

**The author now lives and works in Bellevue, Washington.  
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:**

**E-MAIL – [daniel.benveniste@gmail.com](mailto:daniel.benveniste@gmail.com)**