

Setting Limits In Young Children

McKenzie Pediatrics

Beginning as early as 6 months of age, it is very important that parents begin setting limits on undesirable behaviors. We like to call this age the "puppy age", because this is when human babies begin to have memory retention, and therefore can begin to be "trained". As a baby ages into a toddler, its memory retention lengthens, and thus "bad habits" become more difficult to break, so begin early!

The following is a list of limit setting basics. These rules are important not only for parents to follow, but also grandparents and non-custodial caregivers. Getting this "right" early on will make discipline easier later on in childhood.

- Say "No" Firmly: Telling your baby or young child "No, no honey, don't do that!" in a light and playful tone of voice just doesn't work. Remember, they are just like puppies, who would wag their tails happily at the sound of such a voice. It's the *body language* that matters: the firm tone of voice, the stern look on the face, the eye contact.
- Find Things To Praise: At the end of each day, you should know that you found more opportunities to say "good job!" and "I love you!" than to say "No"
- Don't Say "No" Too Much: No matter how firmly you say it, saying it 500 times a day makes it lose its meaning. Find different words for different situations, such as "gentle", "yuk", "ow", "danger", "hot", etc. Do not use "No" universally for every situation, but instead reserve it for aggressive behaviors such as biting, hitting, pinching, or pulling hair
- Keep It Brief: The attention span of a young child is a few seconds. Speaking to them in lengthy sentences or even paragraphs exceeds their ability to listen. This is not the same thing as "selective hearing loss". Keep your phrases to three words or less. You do not need to explain, nor would they understand, the why-nots.
- Be Consistent: Every adult in the young child's life needs to have the same rules and apply them in the same consistent manner. It is too confusing for a baby or young child to keep track of different rules when around different adults.
- Be Patient: Behaviors take weeks and months to change, not days. If you expect it to take days, you'll only get frustrated, and be prone to making more mistakes.
- Be Involved: A baby or young child whose parents love spending time with them reading, playing, singing, going for walks, etc., is a baby who is more going to want to change their behavior so to please and not upset mommy or daddy. The parent who yells and screams at their child all day is not only being a role model for similar

behavior in their child, but also creating a child who doesn't care to change their behavior because "all mommy and daddy do is yell at me anyway"

- Don't Punish An Emotion: A tantrum is an *allowable* expression of frustration and anger. Do not punish a child for this behavior. Certainly punish and hitting, biting, kicking, or throwing that occurs *during* a tantrum. So long as the older infant or toddler is just screaming, simply put them down in a safe place, and turn your back to them. In other words, use your *body language*, not your words, to show that "you can feel that way, but while you are I'm not going to hold you or pay you any attention."
- Don't Take Everything Personally: It isn't about *you* if your child develops "bad" behaviors. Most children at some time in their first three years of life will hit, bite, kick, etc. These behaviors, while more frequent if children are exposed to parents or adults on television who do these things, are usually just normal physical expressions of internal emotions (anger, frustration, over-stimulation, fatigue, fright). Your child is not pushing *your* buttons, but rather pushing their limits in order to learn their boundaries. You need to provide consistent, patient boundaries without taking it personally. It is especially easy for mothers to take their young child's behavior personally. Young children will show their most complete range of emotions, good and "bad", towards their mother. Mom's need to remember that while you will usually get the lowest lows, you will also be rewarded with the highest highs.
- Keep a Consistent Routine: Babies and young children, understandably, have more behavior difficulties when each day is chaotic and different from the previous day. Children need and thrive on routine...you don't have to maintain *exact* schedules, but a reliable consistent pattern to each day is a must to reduce behavior problems in children of all ages.