

# Parenting the Preschooler

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 **Working for Wisconsin Families**

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## Setting Limits

When you set limits for your children, you demonstrate your love and concern. Setting limits tells a child, "I care about you, I want you to be safe. I want you to act responsibly so that you will learn to get along happily with others." Limits are like the guard rails on a bridge—they provide a sense of security.

**What Kinds of Limits?** Carefully select the limits you think are necessary and, as much as possible, consider the child's point of view. The limits you set should:

- ▶ Protect children from physical harm. An example would be keeping a preschooler away from a hot stove.
- ▶ Protect property. For example, insisting that your youngster return tools to their proper places or showing a preschooler how to use the television set are limits that protect property.
- ▶ Protect children and others from psychological harm. For example, helping children learn how to put their anger into words that are not obscenities, or showing children how to resolve conflicts without vicious teasing are limits that show respect for others' feelings and ideas.

**Limit Your Limits.** Before you set a limit, ask yourself: "Is this rule really important? Am I willing to deal with the conflicts that will occur if my child disregards the limit?"

Your rules should reflect your deeply held convictions or values, ones that you are committed to keeping. For example, do you really need to insist that a child eat all his or her peas, wear certain clothes, or not have a dirty face? Or is it more important to take issue when a child destroys a friend's toy, swears at a parent, or takes money out of your wallet or purse? Parents who

set too many rules can overwhelm their children with too many demands. You are more likely to be effective if you focus on those rules you believe are most important.

**Set Reasonable Limits.** You also need to consider whether your children are able to do what is expected of them. It is not reasonable, for example, to demand that toddlers keep their rooms clean or to expect noisy 10-year-olds to always remember their mealtime manners. Forbidding a child to wet the bed during the night is unreasonable at any age because children have no control over their bladders while they sleep. Denying a child the right to experience emotions such as anger and fear may be unreasonable because these feelings are often natural, healthy responses to difficult situations.

Young children desperately want to please their parents by doing what is expected of them. They believe in their parents. They think their parents know what's best for them (even if they don't always act as though they believe it). Because of their confidence in parents, if children are given an unreasonable limit, they may conclude that there is something wrong with themselves rather than with the limit. Children who feel this way are likely to develop low levels of self-esteem. Later, when they become aware of the unfairness of unreasonable limits, these children may lose respect for their parents and become distrustful of all adult authority.

You can judge whether a limit is unreasonable by observing the way your children act. They may try their best but still fail, or they may show no sign of being able to perform the task. They might become moody and depressed or even angry and defiant.

Remember, if children can't be good at succeeding, then they are easily tempted to be good at failing. With this in mind, set limits so your children can succeed. Then gradually raise your expectations so they can continue to be successful.

**Be Clear and Positive.** State your limits clearly and simply. A clear limit tells a child exactly what is expected and when. If you tell your preschooler: "Every night you are to pick up your toys and put them in the box or on the shelf," your child knows exactly what to do. In contrast, saying "Clean up your room," is vague. Your child may not know exactly what is expected. Don't blame your child for failing to follow instructions if the instructions were not clear in the first place.

Limits will also be more effective if they emphasize the possible-if they tell a child what to do rather than what not to do. To give your child a better understanding of what is allowed as well as what the limits are, say "Play in the yard, not in the street," instead of just saying "Don't go in the street."

When children become angry and act destructively, parents are likely to think first of negative limits: "Don't talk to me like that!" "Don't hit your brother!" "Don't throw things!" But children also need positive limits to help them deal with their emotions and show them appropriate ways to act. Besides the "don'ts," a parent might also say, "When you get angry, tell me how you feel-say you're angry!" This shows a child another way of handling anger.

**Be Consistent.** Limits must be consistently applied and enforced. Children are more likely to respect limits when they realize their parents mean what they say. If you expect your children to wash their hands before meals, you must maintain this limit every day. If you tell your children not to play in a neighbor's yard, it must be clear that this limit applies every time they are outside. However, limits can, and should, be revised if circumstances change.

Consistent limits are dependable. They provide security and direction for children. If a child is told one day not to play with sharp scissors, then the next day is permitted to do so, and the next day is punished for doing so, she will never know what is really expected.

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A child's respect for parents and for authority in general is likely to diminish if parents keep changing the rules and are inconsistent in enforcing limits.

Once a limit is set, the child should know clearly when it applies-one time, some of the time, or all of the time. We might tell our children, "Never play in the street," or "We don't have enough money, so no ice cream today," or "Do not go to Billy's house around dinner time. They are busy then."

**Let Children Help Set Limits.** The ultimate goal in setting limits is to help children develop self-control and self-direction. You can show confidence in your children's abilities by talking with them about problems and by encouraging them to suggest guidelines for their own behavior. As an example, a mother and her 5-year-old son first discussed and then decided together on his bedtime routine: he would go to bed at 8 p.m. and would be allowed to play quietly on his bed 30 minutes before turning off the lights. A decision such as this meets both the child's desire for a transition time before going to sleep and the parent's concern for a reasonable time limit.

By involving your children in setting limits, you are more likely to gain their cooperation in following the rule. Letting children help set their own limits also provides them with experience and practice in decision making.

**Examine Your Limits.** Examine the limits you set for your children. Ask yourself the following:

- ▶ Are they truly important?
- ▶ Are they reasonable?
- ▶ Are they clear enough for the child to understand?
- ▶ Do they tell your child what to do as well as what not to do?
- ▶ Do you apply and enforce them consistently?
- ▶ Do you encourage your children to set their own limits?

Source:

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