

Children's Center

A place where healing begins

Teaching Boundaries

A boundary is "something that indicates or fixes a limit or extent" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary online).

Good boundaries make children less susceptible to child sexual abuse. A child who knows that their body belongs to them, who has been taught that s/he has rights, and has been able to tell grown-ups "no, thank you, I don't want a hug," may be less likely to be tricked into unwanted sexual touching.

What is a boundary?

Boundaries can be visible or invisible. An example of a visible boundary is a fence which separates our house from our neighbors' houses. Our fence is our boundary because it encloses what belongs to us and identifies what we are responsible for.

An example of an invisible boundary is the personal space or "imaginary bubble" around each of us. Although this boundary cannot be seen, we are aware of our comfort level when a stranger gets too close to our personal space, like in an elevator when everyone is packed together.

In simplest terms, whether a boundary is visible or invisible, it defines ownership and responsibility. It lets everyone know what belongs to whom, whether it is a state or county border line, yard, desk space, or who is allowed to give someone a hug. Each of us has personal boundaries because each of us is a separate individual. Inside our invisible "bubble" is the personal space of our body (skin), but also the personal space of our inner life like our beliefs, thoughts, feelings, opinions, etc.

Because boundaries define ownership, it is important that boundaries are treated with care and respect. When traveling, we must first gain permission at the border before entering a foreign country. When entering someone else's home, we knock on the door and wait to be admitted. Individual boundaries are very much like these other boundaries. Only those closest to us are allowed to hug without asking, touch our bodies, or ask personal questions about our private life. It is important that we are aware of personal boundaries and that we gain permission from the owner prior to entering his/her space.

Why are boundaries important?

Boundaries define self. When we have established clear boundaries (both our outer skin boundary and our internal inner life boundary), we are more aware of our own rights, have a strong sense of self, and how we deserve to be treated by others. By first respecting ourselves, we are then able to instill respect in others and set limits around how we want to be treated. With clear boundaries, we also have a clearer picture of our own needs and desires, so that we can choose to ask for assistance if we are unable to meet our needs on our own.

Boundaries clarify responsibilities. Clear boundaries also help define what we "own;" what we are responsible for. This means that we do not have to take on other people's responsibilities unless we choose to, just as they do not have to take on ours. While it is important to be sympathetic to other people's needs, it is equally important to know our own limitations.

Boundaries give us options. Since boundaries give us ownership, we have more control over what happens to us and our bodies. Our choices and options are much broader because we have the right to say whether or not we want something to happen or not to happen.

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How do we teach children to have good boundaries?

Children learn by mirroring their parents. Children learn the fastest and easiest by watching others, most especially parents, so it is important that we model what we want them to learn. The healthier our boundaries are, the more likely our children will learn good boundaries from watching us.

Children learn what belongs to whom. Help children identify what falls within their boundaries of ownership, and teach respect for what belongs to them. At the same time, help children identify what is within other people's boundaries. Allow children to choose what to share with others and what they want to keep special, and ask first before borrowing something from your child. This will teach that s/he has ownership and rights to things that belong to him/her. Also teach that responsibilities come with ownership. It is reasonable to expect our child to care of items that belong to him, keeping in mind age-appropriate abilities.

Honor children's personal space and privacy. Even children have the right to their own privacy. Model knocking before entering their bedroom or bathroom. Let them know that we respect their right to use the bathroom or dress without an audience. Respect their wishes whenever possible and ask for permission before entering their personal space or when taking care of their bodies. When we ask for permission, we let them know that their body belongs only to them.

Give children choices. For certain situations, let the child decide what to do. Maybe instead of going to the park today, ask the child what s/he would rather do. When our children are given options, they realize that they do have a say in what happens in their lives and that their opinion matters.

Teach that it is okay to say "no." Let children know that they do not always have to accept a kiss or a hug from a relative if it makes them uncomfortable. If a child is always told to "just obey," this can actually make him/her more vulnerable to abuse.

We can practice this skill with our children. Role-play asking for a hug and have the child practice saying "no." It is important for our child to learn that they have rights when it comes their own body.

In conclusion, learning to have positive personal boundaries ourselves, recognizing how important they are in daily life, and taking opportunities to teach our children how to have their own good boundaries are all ways to better help keep ourselves and our children safe.