

## Setting Limits

**The goal of positive discipline and guidance is to help children gain inner controls.** As they gain these inner controls they become independent and self-reliant.

Having rules and setting limits appropriate for the age of the children allows them to be **"in control"** within those limits. Having these guidelines helps them to feel safe and secure.

If you asked a child if he/she would like to live in a home or go to a school where there are no limits or rules, he/she will usually answer yes. But inside, the child does not want to be in charge. he/she expects the adult to set some limits and maintain control. As the child grows and matures, the rules and limits should become less adult controlled, and the child/teenager should move gradually to an independent adult who can make choices and set personal rules and limits.

If you came to school and there were not any rules, you can imagine how chaotic it would be. If your teachers were always changing the rules, you would feel very insecure. For example, what if every day you went to school, they changed the order of your classes or the date when assignments were due? How would you feel if you did not know the dates of tests or the teacher's grading scale? That is exactly how a child feels in a home where rules and limits are not clearly defined or are always changing.

We can illustrate this principle with a visual demonstration called the boxes of freedom. (Use the "BOXES" transparency. You can draw boxes and place stick figures in the boxes to illustrate each of the following concepts.)

Look at these boxes as the outside limits for a child. Into which box would you place a 2-year-old? Where would you place a 17-year-old? If the goal is to help a child gain INNER CONTROL, then you want to allow a child to advance gradually into the next box that has greater freedom.

What do you think would happen to a 6-year-old (a child who is out of control and testing to find where his/her limits are) who is placed in box #5? Often children who are constantly getting "into trouble" are those children who do not have clearly defined limits. They are looking for someone to tell them what is or is not acceptable. Children may think it would be great not to have any rules, but inside they wonder if the adults in their lives "really care" about them.

What if we placed a 16-year-old in box #2? Teenagers would probably explode and be totally rebellious because their abilities to make decisions have been taken away from them.

The goal is to allow children to move from box #1 to box #7 as they are able to demonstrate that they are capable of handling responsibilities and limits.

Teenagers who have gained inner control do not need a "curfew" any longer. When they are finished with an activity, they will return home. They no longer need to stay out until the last minute, because they can make their own responsible decisions. One way teenagers can gain more "freedom" is to demonstrate to adult/parents that they do have inner control and have the ability to set their own limits and make responsible choices.

Adults often forget to help children learn from their mistakes. If a child/teenager has moved to box #4, then breaks a rule, some adults will suddenly restrict the child's freedom and place him/her in box #1 or #2. Perhaps after discussing the rules, the child's freedom needs to be restricted a bit until he/she can handle the additional freedom and responsibility. The child might be moved back to box #3 until he/she is ready to try the freedom and responsibilities found in box #4.

Remember, as a parent, the goal is to help children move from box #1 to box #7 where they become responsible members of society. With "freedom" comes responsibility. Adults in our society who are unable to function, break laws (rules), and lose their freedom are placed in the smallest box of freedom of all, JAIL!

Most 5-year-olds have better self-control than 4-year-olds. Children at this age are beginning to show self-control in some situations. (If students have observed children, they can share the difference between the control a 2-year-old shows as compared to a 5-year-old.) By the age of 10, children usually show a reasonable and dependable conscience that helps them to control their behavior. A teenager's conscience is approaching that of a mature adult. Parents still need to provide some boundaries as teens are not always able to do this for themselves. Teenagers still need support and structure.

A group of ninth graders went on a retreat with a church group. Later, one of the adults learned that a few teenagers had stolen some sweatshirts from the camp where they had stayed. The teenagers' parents' first reaction was to deprive their children of any further retreats. (They wanted to place them back into box #2.) The leader suggested that the teenagers suggest a solution to the problem. The teenagers decided to work to pay back the money for the shirts and to approach the administrator of the camp and acknowledge their error. This approach gave the teens an opportunity to assume responsibility for their inappropriate behavior.

As we model fair rules and limits and are consistent in enforcing them, we become models for children. They will learn from us how to handle situations and accept responsibility. The positive attitudes developed in a family has an effect on society as a whole. You can help develop your own inner controls when dealing with the members of your family and use positive methods of discipline and guidance methods. This will help you to develop patience and inner controls in dealing with difficult situations in your home and as you interact with young children.