

BANANAS *Growing Together* HANDOUT

Child development issues for families and child care providers

Setting Limits

Tricks of the Trade

Learn all you can about child development. It is important to understand what types of behavior are appropriate for each age.

When you are setting limits with children, you need to be sure that you believe what you say and do.

Be clear and straightforward about the rules you set and mean to enforce. Too much talking and explaining can lead the child to believe that you are ambivalent.

Similarly, keep your responses "clean." If you are ambivalent, inconsistent or feel guilty about a decision, most children will pick up a "double message." They may use this "opportunity" to further test your statements against your beliefs.

Develop simple rules which clearly reflect your values for behavior. One set might be: *"You can't hurt yourself; you can't hurt others; and you can only break what you make."*

Decide which issues are non-negotiable, e.g. running into the street, and which ones you will discuss. Pick your battles!

Setting limits, also known as discipline, promoting cooperation, making kids mind, etc., etc., etc., can certainly drive adults "bananas." Some of us have very clear ideas of what we expect from children. We run up against problems when a child tests our limits. For others of us, expectations are not as clear. So, we must first determine what behavior we expect from our children before we attempt to set limits. Children need structure in their lives. Without limits, they may be anxious, unruly, unpleasant to be around and, sometimes, even a danger to themselves or others. Like it or not, we adults must set those limits.

When children are small, we try to create a protective environment within which they can begin to explore and develop. This protective playpen gradually expands to become a fenced-in yard, then the neighborhood, the school, the community and the world. Young children feel more secure and successful when they can operate within known boundaries and routines.

It is an adult responsibility to teach children how to live in a social setting so that they will be able to get along with others in a complex world. This learning process lays the foundation for the development of self-control on which the child builds over the years. As a child's sense of internal control grows, it guides behavior when no one is around. This process is not a straight line. Children progress and regress on their way to maturity.

If setting limits is so necessary, why do parents feel so guilty?

"Since my boy turned two, all I say is NO. The bad times seem to outnumber the good. I'm feeling tired and guilty because I'm not handling it as well as I think I should."
"I have been working awfully hard lately and I feel like I never see my child. It makes it really hard for me to say 'bedtime is bedtime' – and mean it absolutely."

Many adults worry that if they set limits children will not like them or that by setting limits they will somehow scar children for life. But children *need* to know what is acceptable behavior and what will not be allowed. Discipline is teaching "yes" as well as teaching "no." **T. Berry Brazelton**, the noted pediatrician and author, states that "the hardest thing about discipline is the guilt it can arouse. But there is no reason for guilt, for the most critical thing we can do for a child is to let her learn her own limits by setting them and helping her live up to them."

Isn't "setting limits" just a polite way of saying punishment?

Not really. Punishment involves making a child feel guilty, fearful or humiliated. It focuses on the child, not the behavior, and assumes that the child is "bad" and needs to be punished. The best you can expect when you punish a child is that she will stop the undesirable behavior out of the fear of being punished. The goal of discipline is to teach children to solve problems, make

More Tricks...

Try to stick to the situation at hand, rather than get tangled in the *shoulds*, *woulds* or *coulds*. Try not to take things (including your child's anger) personally. This will help you and the child stay focused and on track and will keep you from delving into the past or projecting into the future.

Words matter! Choose your words carefully. If the situation allows choice, make that choice specific. *"Do you want to wear your red pants or blue pants?"* Do not make it open-ended with a statement like *"Do you want to wear long pants?"* especially when it's too cold for shorts!

Use phrases which teach what you want a child to learn – say *"Pillows are for punching, people aren't."*

Choose phrases which accurately reflect consequences – say *"If you continue to bang that toy, then I will take it away from you,"* or, *"I cannot allow you to bite me; if you do, then I will put you down."* Do not say something you don't mean or can't actually do – like *"If you don't come with me right now, then I will leave you in the park."*

Follow through on any stated consequence. On occasion, you may change your mind for good cause, but do this very sparingly.

Use positive statements to reinforce positive actions – say, *"I like the way you asked me for that,"* or *"Thank you for asking first."* Or, make up your own nonverbal signal to show approval, such as a thumbs up, a wink or a big smile.

choices, learn to live with the consequences of their choices and, hopefully, achieve desired behaviors. Discipline focuses on the action and not the person – it is the *behavior* that is unacceptable, *not* the child. When you discipline a child, you hope that the child will understand your reasons for doing so and make better choices in the future.

When does harsh discipline become child abuse?

While there is no one answer to this question, our society has taken a position against abusive discipline by establishing the child abuse reporting laws. These laws state that children may not be physically, sexually or emotionally abused or neglected. The provisions of the law also recognize that we are not necessarily born with the knowledge of how to discipline children. Parents who are reported under these laws will often be required to take parenting classes. Children at home or in child care situations have protection under these laws if adults will follow through and report cases of abuse or suspected abuse. Reports can be made anonymously.

Why is disciplining so hard?

"I grew up in a household where everyone screamed at each other and I swore that I would never do the same. But, I sometimes scream at my three-year-old and my husband even believes in spanking."

Although we may all eventually agree that discipline or setting limits is good for children, learning how to do it is not always easy. It is important for parents and child care providers to examine their thoughts and feelings carefully.

Key questions which we might ask ourselves include: *How did my parents treat me? How would I describe their parenting styles? What did I feel about their approach when I was a child? Has my opinion of*

their methods changed as I have matured or as I have become a parent? What values were instilled in me when I was a child that I want to pass on to my children? What different ideas do I have from my parents or the people who reared me? What expectations do I have about children in general, and my children, in particular? Thinking about and answering these questions will help you decide what approach you want to use in disciplining your own children.

Why have I been able to feel successful with one child and such a failure with another?

"My first child was so good; he slept, listened to me when I spoke and never gave me a hard time. But this one never stopped crying from the time I brought him home. He's had me crying ever since as I can't seem to deal with him."

All people are different; all children are different. Any adult's ability to guide a particular child's behavior has its own limits – depending on that child's age and temperament. Unfortunately there are no magic formulas. There are, however, some tricks of the child-rearing trade to learn from other parents. Here is some advice from folks who became experts through experience and who survived to tell the tale!

Inevitable Situations Which Try (Wo)men's Souls:

Temper tantrums – Young children have temper tantrums or lose control for many reasons – stress, fatigue, frustration, anger, disappointment, impending illness, etc. Whatever the reason, while the tantrum is happening, don't waste your breath on explanations or attempt to speak rationally with the child. Act as soon as you can to remove the child or yourself from the difficult situation. When the storm has passed, talk to the child about the

More Tricks...

Tell children what they can do, not what they can't do – say, *“Keep the sand in the sandbox,”* rather than, *“Don't throw sand.”*

Help children learn the difference between feelings and behavior. For example, it is all right for children to feel anger, but it is not all right for them to hurt others when they feel angry. *“I know you are mad at your little sister because she knocked down your tower. I don't blame you for being angry, but you can't pull her hair.”*

Try to set a good example. Parents who throw temper tantrums, treat friends (or each other) rudely or make dishonest statements in front of their children, are giving the children permission to imitate this behavior.

If you have a partner, make a pact not to disagree too often in front of the children. Save those philosophical debates on discipline for times when the children are not around or you will find yourselves targets of a “divide & conquer” campaign.

As **Sheri Glucoft Wong**, family therapist and child care consultant, describes the scene *“It is really quite funny to watch parents crumble right before their children's eyes, ranting and raving, turning red and panting for breath. Who would not want an encore performance?”* Sheri goes on to advise parents to be very low-key and boring: *“Keep your voice calm and controlled. Try not to entertain your child by over-responding to a situation.”*

incident and try to reconstruct what caused the problem and the feelings you both had before, during and after the incident.

Public places – It should come as no surprise to any parent or child care provider, that researchers have actually studied supermarket tantrums to see how many times distraught and humiliated parents give in to belligerent and crying children's demands! The challenge in public is to weigh your options and decide what you want to accomplish. If you want to finish your shopping, compromising may be the way to go. If you want to stick to your rules (no candy, no bribes), you may have to leave the store and shop another time. If you can figure out what's most important to you at that moment, you will be able to take action.

Special events – Many a child's birthday party has been ruined by his own hysterical behavior. And, despite the best-laid plans, many family holidays are remembered as disasters! When planning events, remember to schedule with children in mind by adjusting activities to attention spans, preparing for transitions, and keeping children more or less occupied. Good luck!

Traveling with children – Excursions can become nightmares fraught with stops and starts, screaming and bribes. Keep your rules simple and practical. Collect diversionary games and reading material to take along. Don't forget an old-fashioned song book. Let everyone pack a few favorite toys. Plan ways that family members can get some distance from each other such as stopping for a roadside picnic or rotating seats. And, take along plenty of munchies (not too much sugar!) for the trip.

Mealtimes – The unfortunate truth about mealtimes is that we can't live without them. Because of this, there is every reason to seriously plan for them and to decide what the family

values are. For example, before you became a parent, you may have thought that this would be a pleasant time when all members of the family would get together and share experiences of the day. You may even remember that your parents insisted upon this practice when you were a child. Then you become a parent and nothing is the way you imagined it would be. You may feel like a failure when the evening meal rolls around and some family members are not present or those who are in attendance are crying, interrupting or playing with their food. This is the time to reevaluate your expectations and make new choices. As the children mature and change, so will your mealtimes. They may even get better!

Other stresses in the family – you name them! A new baby, changing or losing a job, new school, health problems, divorce, moving, death....

Out Of Control Or Heading That Way Fast

All adults lose their cool sometimes. Nobody's perfect. When you're really angry at a child, it is a good idea to calm down before setting the consequences. *“I'm very angry with you now. When I calm down, we will discuss what I am going to do about this situation.”* This approach helps you avoid overreacting and/or threatening some action which you may not be able to follow through on – or which you may regret once you've calmed down. Not acting in anger also keeps you from having to feel remorse and guilt for saying hurtful things you don't really mean.

Techniques which adults have used successfully include: counting to ten (or to one hundred or so), removing yourself from the situation by leaving the room (if the children are little) or walking outside or setting a timer and suspending discussion until the bell goes off. Taking a minute to go to the bathroom is less obvious but

can still provide some distance from the situation while you simmer down. All adults do and say things they regret when disciplining children. Learn from your mistakes, forgive yourself when you're wrong and don't forget to pat yourself on the back when you do things right!

Child Care Considerations:

Corporal punishment – Although family values differ, there are regulations in California which prohibit corporal punishment in child care centers, schools and family child care homes. The regulations state that children must not be subjected to physical or unusual punishment, humiliation, mental abuse or punitive interference related to the daily functions of eating, sleeping or toileting. Therefore, even if a parent says (or signs a statement) that a child may be punished in child care, the staff is restricted from carrying out any such punishments.

Crowd control – Group care raises additional issues about setting limits – “crowd control” for one! Following are some special techniques which seem to work well when adults deal with many children. These techniques also apply to large families; but, keep in mind that the emotional environment is different in families than in group child care.

- **Carefully explain all the rules** to parents and to children. Acknowledge the fact that there may be differences between home and child care and that these may be related to values or to techniques. Children can understand that all adults are not the same. They can modify their behavior to meet many differing circumstances as long as the adults are as clear as possible about the rules and the reasons for the rules.

- **Keep your rules simple.** Children (and parents) need to be able to understand rules in order to follow them. If you change a rule, take the time to explain the change.

- **Planning is crucial.** Tell children at the beginning of each day what is going to be expected of them and what changes or different activities will be offered.

- **Try not to compare children** for either praise or blame. Work toward praising groups of children and then speaking individually of one child's accomplishments to that child; the same is true when correcting one child's behavior.

- **Use circle time and role playing** for general discussions of rules, group values and goals. Encourage the children to participate in developing appropriate rules.

- **Time-Out, Diversion and Redirection** are all techniques which work well. Be sure to design them with appropriate age guidelines. For example, with children under three, time-out sessions are used to allow them to calm down. These children are too young to really analyze their actions or promise to reform!

- **When you are having difficulty managing a child,** talk things over with the parents and, if the parent gives permission, with former caregivers, teachers, etc. Often, other adults have encountered the same behavior and may have some good suggestions on how to deal with it. It helps to know for example that “*Susie will never take a nap, no matter what you try. It's better to find something quiet she can do.*”

Remember that parents are very sensitive when it comes to their children. Try to begin any discussion about a child's behavior with something positive and avoid being too critical if you want a parent's support and cooperation.

(This Handout is based in part on a workshop by Sheri Glucoft Wong.)

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