

Teaching with Boundaries – The First Three Steps

A woman I know allowed her 9-year-old daughter to have a friend sleep over during the holidays. When she was pouring her coffee the next morning, her little guest walked into the kitchen and asked "Can I have some coffee?" The mother denied her request and proceeded to learn about many other adult-type privileges and rituals she was included in, at her home. Based on what the little girl revealed, it was obvious to the woman that this child was in a situation where there were very few boundaries and her mom was treating her more as an adult girlfriend and less as a child.

Many years ago when my middle daughter was around the same age and had a friend sleep over, her friend unpacked a couple of movies from her duffle bag for them to watch that evening. After a close examination of the videos, I told our little house guest that I was not OK with showing these videos in our home. I was familiar with two of them and the content was not, in my opinion, at all appropriate for my children. The third was a movie I had not yet seen and could not allow them to watch it because I had not. I always reviewed movies before I would allow my children to see them, assuming they were not a Disney type of animation. My daughter's friend declared to me that it was alright, her mom lets her watch PG and R rated movies all the time. I stood by my rules and the videos were not played.

I have a big concern about parents who have little or no boundaries for their children and expose them to things of an adult nature, sooner than they need to. I am appalled when I see young children in a movie theater who are about to watch a movie with violence or sex. I have even had some parents tell me that I'm too old fashioned or too paranoid. Some parents who have expressed that it is too difficult to filter their children from such things these days, have said "They are going to see (or experience) it somewhere so why make life difficult for myself." My personal philosophy has been that if I take the measures up front to create clear, defined rules and boundaries for my children, they will take me serious as a parent and discipline will be easier as they grow. But if we get too lax in our parenting, it becomes a *slippery slope* and we soon begin losing control as they get older. I made it a point to preserve my children's childhoods to allow them to fully enjoy this innocent and limited time of exploration, self-discovery, and emotional growth. I wanted them to form whole as a child before they grew into the next cycle of change.

Boundaries are critical for children to learn from. Here are three simple suggestions you can put in place right away.

House Rules. All children need boundaries and limits to learn from. A good place to start is with general house rules for them to abide by and this includes children as young as preschoolers. Just having this respectful discussion alone will help them feel like they are a part of the family and may contribute to them embracing your rules. In a family meeting setting, sit down with your children and discuss some areas that need some boundaries, such as greeting each other, use and management of coats and shoes, use of electronics or the telephone, bedtimes, and friends. If you have a child old enough to write, allow them to be the meeting scribe to capture all the rules. Once the list is finalized (don't make it too complex), have someone read it and then everyone sign it. You can then post it somewhere where everyone can see it and be reminded of the rules.

Chores. Children as young as preschoolers can be given chores to help out around the house. It begins to teach them responsibility and acceptable behaviors. Select another family meeting setting and let the children know you'll be discussing chores. Encourage their involvement in the discussion by asking them what kinds of things they can help out with. Obviously, preschoolers might have one or two very simple jobs. School-age children can have about a half dozen. Keep the items simple and easy to track and be sure that some of them include picking up after themselves. Some of them might be: making their bed, setting the table, putting away their laundry, folding towels, filling up the dog food dish, etc. I have never paid my children an allowance for these types of tasks and have told them that these are required for being a member

of the family. I've also told them that this list of daily or weekly chores represents cooperation with us, and when we get cooperation regularly, we are more likely to want to cooperate with them when they want something. Cooperation from us might mean bringing them to a friend's house to play, taking them to a movie or out to eat, or planning extra fun on the weekend. Create a checklist of the chores that they can check off each day as they complete them to help keep them on track.

Limiting electronics. I suggest putting limits on children's exposure to television, the computer, and video games. Limiting them to perhaps one hour a day on school days and two hours on weekend days will teach them about all good things in moderation. Parents have told me countless stories where they watched their children rediscover the lost art of playing and reading when their children knew their access to electronics was over for the day. I have stuck to these time limits and they included any of the three devices, although I have given bonus time for the car when going somewhere or if they have family or friends over to play. But even the bonus time has a start and a stop.

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