

# Teaching Kids About Boundaries

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Why empathy and self-awareness play a major role

Rae Jacobson

For most parents setting boundaries for young kids' behavior is second nature: No hitting. Don't interrupt. We don't grab toys out of other kids' hands.

But as they get older, and social interaction gets more complex, it's not enough to just learn the rules. They need to learn to set boundaries for themselves and respect those of others. And that takes being able to recognize what others want and need — and express what they want and need, too.

“Boundaries are essentially about understanding and respecting our own needs, and being respectful and understanding of the needs of others,” explains Stephanie Dowd, PsyD, a *clinical psychologist*,

“and for that to work, we need to be putting a big emphasis on helping kids develop greater empathy and self-awareness.”

## Why is empathy important?

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For some parents, the idea of teaching children who haven't quite mastered the art of tying their shoes to be more empathetic might seem a little absurd. But you can help them slowly build an awareness of others. Kids may not grasp the subtleties of what it means to be empathetic, but they don't need to.

“You're not going to sit down with a 4-year-old and say, okay, this is what empathy means,” says Rachel Busman, PsyD, a clinical psychologist. “What we want is for kids to start developing that awareness of how others are feeling, and begin using it as a kind of guide for how to behave.”

And at the same time, we want to help kids get comfortable with articulating their own feelings and setting limits, even as they respect others' limits. That takes practice.

## How to help kids develop empathy

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“Empathy is something we think of as being very adult,” says Mandi Silverman, PsyD, a clinical psychologist. “But in reality, by age 3 most kids will instinctually show concern for a crying friend, or realize when someone has a “booboo” and want to give it a band-aid.”

Younger kids often learn best by experience, she explains, so parents should start by addressing problem behaviors when they happen. “Social skills coaching is always best when you can do it in real time,” she says, “They’re more likely to remember what to do in that situation and be able to replicate the behavior next time it comes up.”

Luckily (or not), most kids offer ample opportunities to practice intervening in the moment. For example, “How do you think Mark felt when you took his toy away?”

If your child grabs a reluctant friend, you could encourage him to think about how his friend might be feeling, and why asking before touching is important. “It’s important to ask before touching someone else, because that person might not be feeling well, or they could be in a bad mood and not want to play just then.”

Sometimes kids’ egotism can be a helpful tool, says Dr. Busman. “Ask your child to think about how he feels when his sister won’t let him play with her friends, or won’t share her dessert. Then ask how he thinks she’d feel if he did the same.”

Using your child’s feelings as a mirror for others can help create perspective — and give him a chance to link actions to the feelings they cause.

## **Rules work both ways**

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One way to help kids understand why it’s important to follow rules is to see them as reciprocal.

- People are in charge of their own bodies, and it’s not okay to touch them if they don’t want you to, just like it’s not okay for someone to touch you in a way you don’t like.
- Sometimes things that seem fun to you are not fun for the other person. “A kid might want to jump on his friend’s back because that sounds fun,” suggests Dr. Busman, “but if he doesn’t take time to ask if the friend is okay with that, and doesn’t make sure he’s ready, someone is likely to end up getting hurt.” And that person could be you, too.
- Listening when people are talking, especially when they’re giving instructions or asking us to do something, or not do something, is how we stay safe and make sure other people are safe, too. If people aren’t listening to you, they won’t know what you need or want, either.

## **Practice setting boundaries**

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Learning how to be more empathetic can be a big help for kids when it comes to social interactions, but it's equally important to help your child learn to advocate for himself and his boundaries when other kids are being pushy, aggressive or just thoughtless.

Helping your child make a plan for what to do when someone isn't respecting his feelings or boundaries will give your child the chance to practice standing up for himself.

For example, you could ask, "What are some ways you could let Jeremy know you don't like it when he hugs you without asking?" Go over some simple phrases your child can use to advocate for himself: "Please stop." "I don't like that." "It's my turn now."

Make a list of Get-A-Grown-Up scenarios. Examples could include:

- Hitting, or pushing, or even a kid who's just playing too rough
- A child who won't take no for an answer
- A situation where he feels unsafe or uncomfortable. For example if his friends want to climb a fence into someone else's yard or are playing too close to the pool

Helping kids get comfortable advocating for their boundaries early will help them do so in the future when the stakes can be much higher.

## **Model behavior**

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When it comes to learning anything, kids look to their parents for cues on how to behave, and empathy and self-awareness are no exception. If you want instructions to stick, it's important to practice what you preach.

"We want parents to be demonstrating the kind of behaviors they want their kids to emulate," says Dr. Busman. "You may be speaking to your partner, or a friend, but that doesn't mean your child isn't paying attention and picking up signals on how to think, how to act, and how to interact with others."

When kids hear parents checking with each other to see if they're on the same page before they make decisions, or asking a friend how they feel — and really listening to the answer — kids are more likely to follow suit.

## **Find, and discuss, examples**

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Another way to make empathy part of the conversation is to draw on kids' favorite media, pointing out examples of good or bad behavior. For example, if a character on TV is being bullied, try asking: "How do you think he felt when the other kids called

him stupid? Is it ever okay to call someone something like that?"

Niki Kriese and her husband Mat started doing this early on with their two sons, Simon (4) and Felix (6). Niki says her family often relies on examples from books, movies, or TV to help get a conversation going. "The other night Mat was reading an old Berenstain Bears book to the kids," she says. In the book, the bear family was trying to decide how to spend the day together.

Halfway through, Mat stopped and asked the kids, "Hey, has the mother said one word so far?" The boys agreed that she hadn't. When they'd finished reading, he noted that at no point in the story had anyone asked the mother bear what she'd like to do, or if she was having fun.

"Do you think *your* mom would like that?" he queried Simon and Felix.

The boys shook their heads.

"Would you?" Again, the answer was no.

The object, Niki explains, isn't necessarily to start a deep discussion, but rather to help her sons develop curiosity about how others are thinking and feeling. "Obviously they're not processing it in the same way we do," she says, "but the hope is that we're setting them up to think critically and empathetically as they get older."

## **Embrace diversity**

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Another key part of instilling empathy is making sure kids are interacting with people who are different than themselves on a regular basis. "It can be hard for kids to make the jump from how *they* feel when something happens, to how someone else might feel about the same thing," says Dr. Busman. "And sometimes that's especially hard when the other person looks or behaves differently than they do."

One thing that encourages acceptance of differences is activities that give your child the opportunity to play with kids from different backgrounds, races and physical abilities who share common interests.

It also helps to demystify kids of other genders as early as possible. "What we don't want is for kids to hit puberty and still be viewing the opposite sex as an alien species," says Dr. Dowd. Parents can help by making sure activities provide ample opportunity for girls and boys to play together and collaborate on an even playing field.

## **Respect limits on offering affection**

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Kids should be allowed to decide for themselves if, and when, they want to show affection. “Grandma may be expecting a big hug when she comes over, but we want kids to understand that things like hugs and kisses, whether they’re getting or giving them, should be a choice,” says Dr. Busman.

Parents should avoid pushing kids to be affectionate when they’re not comfortable. But forgoing grandparental smooches doesn’t have to mean being impolite. “Come up with something else your child can do instead,” suggests Dr. Busman. For example, instead of a kiss on the cheek, she could pick something she’s more comfortable with, like waving or shaking hands.

## **Take your kids’ limits seriously**

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Really listen when your child tells you what is, and isn’t, okay with them, and take their requests to heart whenever possible. It sounds like a no-brainer, but Dr. Busman explains that dismissing children’s boundaries is often something grown-ups do all the time without even realizing it.

“If a child says she hates being tickled, or picked up, don’t say, ‘Oh come on, you don’t really hate it.’ Instead say, ‘I hear you and I won’t do it again.’”