RESOURCES GUIDE

How to Set Limits

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"Why do we have to do this?"
"Why can't I?"
"Who's gonna make me?"

Challenging questions such as these are echoed in many settings and workplaces.

But when you set effective limits, you use one of the most powerful tools to gain a person's cooperation.

Knowing there are limits on their behavior helps the people in your care feel safe. It also helps them learn to make appropriate choices.

Be flexible, respectful, and creative in your limit setting and you will promote positive behavior change.

You can't force someone to behave in a certain way. But when you offer choices, you can *teach* and reinforce appropriate behavior.

Tips for Success

When using the techniques in this guide, keep three things in mind:

✔ **Setting a limit is not the same as giving an ultimatum.**
Limits aren't threats. *"If you don't attend group, your weekend privileges will be suspended."*

Limits offer choices with consequences. *"If you attend group, you'll be able to go to all the activities this weekend. If you don't attend group, you'll have to stay behind. It's your decision."*

✔ **The purpose of limits is to teach, not to punish.**
Through limits, people begin to understand that their actions, positive or negative, result in predictable consequences.

By offering **realistic** and motivating choices and consequences, you provide a structure for good decision making.

Having the option to make a choice will empower the person.

And if you need to enforce the consequences you set, you provide the person with a structure for learning.

✔ **Setting limits is more about listening than talking.**
Taking the time to really listen will help you better understand the person's thoughts and feelings. By listening, you'll learn more about what's important to them, and that will help you set more meaningful limits.

See the situation from the other person's point of view.
Can they feel your kindness or your frustration? Practice perspective-taking skills. Be mindful of your own behavior and how it affects the person you're trying to help.

CPI's 5-Step Approach
to Setting Limits

Follow these steps to help someone make a positive behavior choice.

Set limits that are:
- Clear
- Simple
- Reasonable
- Enforceable

1. **Explain which behavior is inappropriate.**

   Saying "Stop that!" may not be enough. The person may not know if you're objecting to how loudly they're talking or to the language they're using. Be specific.

2. **Explain why the behavior is inappropriate.**

   Again, don't assume that the person knows why their behavior is not acceptable. Are they disturbing others? Being disrespectful? Not doing a task they've been assigned?

3. **Give reasonable choices with consequences.**

   Instead of issuing an ultimatum ("Do this or else"), tell the person what their choices are, and what the consequences of those choices will be. Ultimatums often lead to power struggles because no one wants to be forced to do something. By providing choices with consequences, you admit that you cannot force the person's decision. But you can determine what the consequences for their choices will be.

4. **Allow time**.

   Generally, it's best to allow the person a few moments to make their decision. Remember that if they're upset, they may not be thinking clearly. It may take longer for them to think through what you've said.

5. **Be prepared to enforce your consequences.**

   Limit setting is meaningless if you don't consistently enforce the consequences you've set. For that reason, it's important to set consequences that are reasonable, enforceable, within your authority, and within the policies and procedures of your organization.

Preventive Ways to Set Limits

Setting limits is a helpful *intervention* strategy when someone is refusing a task or refusing to cooperate. Often, it can also be a powerful *prevention* strategy when you want to help someone avoid getting upset in the first place.

To be proactive:

Set environmental limits. Create physical spaces or times to reinforce certain behaviors (worktime, break time, reading corner, personal time).

Display visible expectations. Show what the person *should* do rather than *not* do. ("Be on time" rather than "Don't be late.")

Offer visual choices (a finished work bin, choice boards, etc.).

Think through limits for common refusal behaviors in advance, rather than in the moment. For example, tell the person before they arrive: "You could put your cell phone away or bring it to the office."

Prepare for transitions verbally ("We have five minutes left") and also visually (set a timer).

To build relationships:

Share control of environments through small choices (sit or stand, chair or ball, now or later).

Offer choices for everyday tasks (restroom, supply routines, time frame for completing tasks).

Start positive conversations to build rapport. For example, point out the person's preferences. ("I notice you like skateboarding.")

Empower the person, after they do a non-preferred activity, by allowing them to choose a preferred activity.

Seek cooperation—not compliance. And remember: Setting limits raises your chance of gaining the person's cooperation, but does not guarantee it.

Be flexible. Aim for Plan A. Be open to Plan B.

Verbal and Nonverbal
Ways to Set Limits

How you say something is as important as what you say. Try these tips for showing and telling someone that you're here to help.

Use personal space, body language, and communication through touch appropriate to the situation and your relationship with the individual.
You might try moving closer to the person, making eye contact, or nodding or shaking your head to communicate or reinforce limits. Placing a gentle hand on their shoulder may be comforting or encouraging and maintaining a calm body posture may help to put them at ease.

State what is allowed or provided without telling the person what to do. ("We can talk after our work is finished" rather than "you need to be quiet.")

Weigh the choices, offering two positives.
This approach incorporates two acceptable choices and can result in positive consequences. ("Which do you want to work on first, math or science?")

State and encourage the positive choice first.
Do this before introducing consequences or negative choices.

Be prepared to redirect the person back to the topic at hand.
If their attention drifts, help them refocus on the desired outcome.

A person who's upset may not be able to focus on everything you say. Be clear, speak simply, and offer the positive choice first. If you don't state the positive choice first, they may not even hear it.

Practice Setting Limits

Here are some starter phrases to help you set positive limits. Try these and you'll see the effects of offering choices rather than ultimatums.

Starter phrases:

- You can _____ when you _____.

- First _____, then _____.

- When _____, then _____.

- If _____, then _____ (positive).

- Would you like to _____ or _____?

- You can either do _____ or _____.

- You might want to try _____. If you choose to _____.

- Do you want to _____ now or in five minutes?

- You're welcome to stay with us when you _____.

- I'll begin as soon as you (are seated, take out materials, stop yelling, etc.).

- I'll be able to listen as soon as your voice is as calm as mine.

- I'll be glad to discuss this when _____.

- I care about you too much to argue. I'll be happy to discuss this with you as soon as the arguing stops.

Add your own starter phrases:

-

-

-

-

-

Sample Situations

Use these scenarios for role-plays, practices, rehearsals, mini-trainings, and refreshers. Make setting limits second nature!

A person refuses to:	Positive limit (what we do want to do)	Negative limit (what we don't want to do)
Complete classwork.	After your work is done, you will have five minutes of free time to talk.	If you don't finish your work, you won't have any free time.
Take off hat.	Would you like to put the hat in your room or in this drawer?	If you don't take your hat off, you'll go to the office.
Dress for phys ed.	When you dress for phys ed, you will receive participation points.	If you don't dress for phys ed, you will fail.

Add your own limits to these scenarios:

A person refuses to:	Positive limit (what we do want to do)	Negative limit (what we don't want to do)
Take out materials.		
Put away an item (phone, marker, etc.).		

Write your own scenarios:

A person refuses to:	Positive limit (what we do want to do)	Negative limit (what we don't want to do)

Limits are powerful tools for teaching appropriate behavior. Their purpose is not to show who's boss, but to give the individuals in your care guidance, respect, and a feeling of security.

Self-Assessment

☐ Can I describe the benefits of setting limits?

☐ Can I describe how to set effective limits?

☐ Can I describe strategies to implement positive limit-setting?

☐ Can I describe how verbal and nonverbal limits will decelerate situations?

☐ Can I describe and develop preventive ways to set limits?

Action Plan

1. What are two limit-setting strategies I will use in my interactions?

2. How will I be able to assess my skill level at setting limits?

3. Who will I follow up with to share my experiences as I try setting limits?

Notes

We hope you found this resource helpful.

Please feel free to share this guide with a friend or colleague.

Have questions? We're here for you!
Give us a call at 800.558.8976 or email
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