

# Setting Limits – So Little Understood, So Greatly Needed

Judi Orion

When offering parent information meetings at school, which meeting consistently has the best attendance? When conferencing with parents, which child-rearing topic causes the most concerns; raises the most questions? When working with young teachers, which class issues cause the most problems? When training teachers, which aspect of "student teaching" gives the young teachers the most trouble? As a teacher of young children, which issues send you somewhere for advice or consume vast amounts of your planning time or cause the greatest frustrations?

Why, for many of us, is the idea of setting limits so difficult, sometimes viewed as negative, and not what is envisioned when thinking of working with young children?

All of life has limits. Limits are what make it possible for us to live together as social beings. Without limits we would live in chaos, with a fair amount of insecurity and with little or no predictability.

Limits offer tiny children a sense of security, order and consistency, safety, and a preliminary ability to predict what will happen next. Within a framework of limits a small child is able to make a positive human self-construction. When small children are left with no limits they are abandoned to their own devices and any construction that has been achieved is often destroyed. Movement patterns become chaotic, and the voice becomes loud and inappropriate for the situation. These behaviors, unfortunately, reinforce the view of the "terrible twos." Within a framework of limits, toddlers, who often rebel against limits, come to know that someone will control things when they are out of control. (Adolescents, who often rebel against limits, use those limits set by a loving family as a safeguard; when risking not being accepted by their peers by choosing to go against the group wishes, they use those limits as the excuse.)

Anywhere one goes today it is, unfortunately, the norm to encounter situations where an adult is unwilling to firmly and lovingly set limits for his or her toddler. We witness temper tan-

trums, physical abuse – the toddler striking out at the adult, crying, whining, begging; this is usually indicative of an experience pattern that informs the toddler that she simply has to persist and she will achieve what she wants. She "wears the adult down." This leaves a toddler with an unrealistic idea of personal power – power she knows she cannot really handle.

With the birth of each new being, we have an opportunity to help this child reach her full human potential or we can submit to her every whim, resulting in an unhappy, selfish child who constantly searches for someone who cares enough to tell her, "No, stop."

During the first year of an infant's life, it is difficult to imagine having to set limits on his behavior. A baby indicates her needs; if we are observant enough, we determine what those needs are and try to meet them. This system works great until this being begins to move about the environment. Once this being begins moving we find ourselves saying "No, don't touch," more often than we would like. Perhaps the environment has not been prepared to allow for exploration. If we acknowledge the infant's need to explore, does this mean we have to allow her to explore any and everywhere? Absolutely not. And perhaps this is when the problem begins.

Setting limits begins the moment an infant begins moving around the environment. A safe place for exploration is created and this is where the baby can explore. Of course, she is interested in any and everything. But some things simply are not safe to explore and therefore not allowed.

Parents and teachers are so often confused about what kind of limits are appropriate and when to set them. Since most of you are here primarily in the role of educator, not parent, I would like to focus on setting limits within an infant community.

First of all, in preparation for a community of children, we have to think about and envision the community. How would we like to see it running? What kind of behaviors would we expect in the children? Remember-

ing that children arrive to us from many different parenting styles, we have to be clear about the style we plan to incorporate and be consistent with it.

We must also look to the present, the near future, and the distant future. If our goal for the distant future is to have an individual who is self-disciplined, who can accept the rules even if not in complete agreement with them, who can live peacefully in any society accepting and honoring the freedoms of others, then we must prepare for that future now.

If we want a child who can handle the freedoms offered in the primary Montessori class, who can interact with the larger group of children in the primary, who can master self-discipline in the primary years, then we must begin that process now.

If we want a child who can master impulse control (a major developmental milestone of the second year), who can slowly come to accept the existence of others and the rights and freedoms of others, then we must begin preparing for that the day the child enters our community.

This leads us to contemplate the "rules of the community." Like any other community of humans, each one's freedom ends where another's freedom begins. So what kinds of rules must be established to protect the freedom of all the members of this community?

1. No one may hurt another person's body.
2. No one may harm the materials in the environment.

When you have too many rules with children, you find yourself constantly spending time reinforcing the rules and not working with the children.

With rule number one, "No one may hurt another person's body," this implies that there will be no biting, pushing, pulling away from, or hitting. Even one child's yelling may be "hurtful" to the ears of another person. Whenever this occurs, the behavior is stopped in one of several ways.

You speak to the child firmly, "We do not bite people. You may bite on this

teething ring.” Acknowledge the frustration behind the biting but do not excuse the biting because of it. Also, don’t create victims by giving undue attention to the child who has been bitten or pushed. Acknowledge the hurt, put ice on it, if necessary, write an accident report and get on with things. To the perpetrator we must very firmly and very clearly state the limits again and again. Gradually, the children will come to accept that limits regarding their physical safety are being enforced. “We yell outside; inside we speak softly.” “You may sit here to have your tantrum.”

With rule number two, “No one may harm the materials in the environment,” it is implied that nothing can be thrown, that one must move one’s body in such a way not to bump into furniture, people, etc. When running, throwing, etc. occurs, the behavior is stopped. “We run outside; inside we walk.” “We throw balls outside.” “If you throw the material, you may not work with it.” “Before choosing that puzzle, you must put the animals back on the shelf.”

We must also remember that a toddler is in a developmental crisis we refer to as the “crisis of self-affirmation” (as opposed to the “opposition crisis”). A child in this developmental crisis needs to be given choices so that she feels empowered to have some control over herself and that those adults important to her acknowledge that she is a completely separate being from her mother.

When interrupting inappropriate behavior – running, yelling, biting, pushing, etc. – whenever possible, give the child a choice. But sometimes a choice is not a possibility.

“I can see you need to run. Would you like to go outside now to run or run later?”

“We’re going outside. Can you put your shoes on yourself or do you need my help?”

“The puzzle must be picked up. Can you do it by yourself or do you need help?”

“I see you have left the watering can on the floor. Before choosing something else to work on you must put the watering can away.”

“This paint is not for the walls. Let’s go wash your hands and choose other work.”

For many adults we procrastinate in setting limits, allowing our emotions to become involved and perhaps noticing some underlying anger creeping in. Then, when we voice a limit, we are so emotionally “hooked” that we are either ambivalent or unclear, or the limit is not realistic for the situation. We overreact and are usually emotionally involved. Perhaps our ego is involved in how well the children follow our rules. Perhaps we feel as if we are an inadequate teacher if we have discipline problems. Perhaps we have some unresolved control issues in which we have to make the children understand that we are the ones in control. The secret is that we are not the ones in control of everything; we can only control ourselves. If children are given work appropriate for their developmental needs of the moment, they come into control of themselves.

In order to be clear about setting limits, and about the appropriateness of limits, we must take some time for soul-searching. What was our personal experience with limits as a child? Do we remember? Do we view our childhood as being either very restrictive or very free? If we have children of our own, how do we/did we set limits for them? Do we understand and accept a young child’s deep need for exploration and allow for those possibilities?

When a young baby begins walking, they want and need to walk. Do we allow this possibility? Or would we prefer them to now sit quietly and play? In an Infant Community, do we accept the abilities of these young children and allow them to work to their own capacity, or do we try to interfere with the way we think the work should be done? Do we have perfectionistic tendencies hampering our relationship with children? Are our expectations realistic for the abilities and developmental needs of the children in our group?

Limits are going to be handled differently for children at different developmental stages. An 18-month-old is going to need more assistance in putting work away, but the work will be put away. A two-year-old can put her work away independently and accept that nothing else can be taken on the shelf until the first activity is put away.

If you notice work left out and the

“owner” is already engaged, is concentrating on something new, wait until she finishes. For an older child (a two-year-old) you simply step in when she finishes and say, “I notice you left the animals on the table. Please put them away now.” For younger children, once they are actively engaged in new work, the “old” work is no longer theirs. They will often happily help you put it away but with no ownership of the work. They are so “in the moment” that once finished, the work is no longer theirs. And so, with the limit that the work will be returned to its place, you seduce the younger child to help you, you give a very clear choice to the two-year-old.

When a child comes into the environment having had few or no limits, we must simultaneously work with the parents to help them understand our belief about limits. If parents cannot accept that their child will live with limits in the environment, then perhaps the child will be better served in a different type of program. There does come a point when one has to accept that Montessori may not be the answer for everyone. However, before sending away families, examine your own beliefs first. Are you comfortable with setting limits or does ambivalence creep in? “Put your work away, o.k.?” “Want to help me clean up the table?” “You hurt my feelings when you say that.”

How clear are you about limits? There is not a formula one can give about how to set them. You must first believe in the benefits and necessity of limits; then you must practice setting them. They are unique to each situation but, at the same time, general to the running of a social group.

If you find you want or need more specific help regarding setting limits, I recommend ordering the tape by the Love and Logic Institute, *Toddlers, Love and Logic Parenting for Early Childhood*. The Love and Logic Institute is an institute dedicated to helping parents and educators use a loving and logical approach to child raising.

#### From their materials

What is *Love and Logic*? Love allows children to grow through their mistakes. Logic allows them to live with the consequences of their choices.

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**The Love and Logic Process:**

1. **Shared control: Gain control by giving away the control you don't need.**
2. **Shared thinking and decision-making: Provide opportunities for the child to do the greatest amount of thinking and decision-making.**
3. **Equal shares of consequences with empathy: An absence of anger causes a child to think and learn from her mistakes.**
4. **Maintain the child's self-concept: Increased self-concept leads to improved behavior and improved achievement. □**

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**Judi Orion**, Director of Training at the Assistants to Infancy training in Denver, has lectured extensively about the child under three in the states and abroad. Judi is a trainer at the 3-6 level, and AMI examiner and also consultant at the 0-3 and 3-6 levels. Judi trained with Dr. Silvana Montanaro at the 0-3 level then worked with Dr. Montanaro when she introduced 0-3 training in the U.S. She has been involved with Montessori education for 30 years.

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