

Positive Parenting: Why Keeping Our Limits When Children Become Upset is Important

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Setting a limit in theory sounds great. In practice, keeping that limit isn't always easy. Often setting a limit means that our child will be upset. They might cry, wail, flail, scream, stomp or even bite, hit and kick. In these moments, it can be difficult to keep our cool, let alone hold our limits.

Setting certain limits really is important. For each family or situation the limits may be different, but once a limit has been set, even if the child becomes upset by that limit, it is important to make sure we that we don't back track on that limit just to avoid the upset.

Holding our limit (not going back on our decision) though, is not about showing power or authority over a child or being consistent just to be consistent.

Holding our limits is about offering calm reassurance to our children that they can trust our decisions.

One day at baby/tot playgroup, a 2 year old, Matt*, chucked a car across the room for the third time. Matt's mother who had already calmly explained it was not alright to throw the cars and had demonstrated a few other ways that were safe to play, was now visibly frustrated. "Why doesn't he listen!!!" she whispered to me.

With thirteen other toddlers in the room, the car throwing just wasn't going to work so I let her know it was alright to pick up the little car, to explain briefly her reason to Matt and put the car away.

So Matt's mom said to Matt something along the lines of "I asked you not to throw the car, I am putting it away now because throwing is not safe." Matt promptly started to cry. "You really wanted to keep playing with the car." I offered. Matt screamed "Car! Car!"

"You liked playing with the car" His mother said. Matt screeched a bit and then tears started flowing.

We sat there, listening but not saying anything else. Matt's mom put her hand on his back and he was ok with that. About two minutes passed and Matt looked up at me, now calmer. "Give car?" he asked.

"I can see you are very upset the car is away. It's going to stay away so everyone will be safe." Matt offered a small sigh. "It's not what you wanted." I added and Matt nodded. "Do you feel like throwing things today?" I asked. Matt shook his head yes, very enthusiastically. "Well, you can use the balls over there, they are soft and safe for throwing" I said. Matt smiled, got up as fast as he possibly could and scampered over to toss the colorful balls.

When we set limits and hold them, with kindness and full acceptance of any emotions that come with that limit, we are creating an opportunity for the child to express their authentic feelings of the situation while creating trust that they are accepted, loved and cared for.



When a limit is truly reasonable and needed, the most respectful and kind thing to do is calmly hold the limit while accepting and listening to the upset.

Children find safety in limits and boundaries that are clear and set with calm and confidence. Setting and keeping limits does not have to be about ultimate control. It can be an opportunity to create an exchange that leads to a safe expression of any and all feelings plus understanding, trust and learning. It also does not have to be the first step, as in this case, Matt's mom had first explained and asked nicely, but ultimately, Matt just wasn't ready to not throw and therefore safety became a concern and setting a limit was appropriate.

While it is hard at times to stay calm and set a limit with a kind voice, it is that act of staying calm and confident that will help our children transition from disappointment into acceptance and finally move onto something else. Plus, this actually works and helps children learn and respect important limits. For example, the following week at playgroup, Matt asked for the little car and promptly said to me "No throw car, only ball" and he didn't throw the car, but instead, played with it for a long while and then moved on to throwing the soft balls.

When we let go of punitive parenting and authority over the child style of parenting, **setting a limit with kindness and consistency and then actually holding it may at first feel similar to punishing or being authoritarian.** With time and practice though, it is possible to be confident, calm and consistent in a way that conveys that the limits are about creating safety, building trust and guidance.

What part of setting limits is most challenging to you?

Peace & Be Well,

Ariadne

*Matt's name was changed.

The following two tabs change content below.



Ariadne Brill

Ariadne is a happy and busy mama to three children. She practices peaceful, playful, responsive parenting and is passionate about all things parenting and chocolate. Ariadne has a Masters in Psychology and is a certified Positive Discipline Parenting Educator. She lives on top of a beautiful mountain with her family, and one cuddly dog.