



BOUNDARIES BY AGE GUIDE

A Framework for Setting Loving Limits

WHY BOUNDARIES CREATE SECURITY

Research shows that children with consistent boundaries:

- Experience less anxiety and greater confidence
- Develop stronger decision-making skills
- Feel more freedom to explore safely
- Show better emotional regulation

As Dr. Brené Brown notes: "Children need physical and emotional boundaries that are clear, firm, and loving. The clearer and more consistent the boundaries, the more secure the child."

WHY BOUNDARIES EQUAL LOVE

Boundaries aren't the opposite of love, they're an essential expression of it:

- **Safety:** Boundaries protect children from potential harm
- **Predictability:** Consistent limits create a sense of security
- **Skill Building:** Boundaries teach essential life skills, and frustration tolerance
- **Value Formation:** Limits help children internalize important values
- **Brain Development:** Clear boundaries support healthy neural pathways

AGE-SPECIFIC BOUNDARIES

TODDLERS & PRESCHOOLERS (AGES 2-5)

Key Boundaries to Prioritize:

- Safety rules (holding hands in parking lots, seat belts, hot stoves, pool/water safety etc.)
- Consistent sleep schedule (7-8pm bedtime)
- Limited screen time (max 1 hour/day of quality content & no video games to protect healthy brain development)
- Basic manners and gentle touch expectations
- No hitting, biting, hurting others/pets, no screaming at people, and using kind words
- Simple household routines

Effective Approaches:

- Use simple, direct language
- Provide immediate, consistent responses
- Redirect to acceptable alternatives
- Use visual cues and timers
- Focus on physical safety first

Sample Scripts:

- "Hands are for helping, not hitting."
- "Food stays at the table."
- "First we clean up, then we can play outside."

EARLY ELEMENTARY (AGES 6-9)**Key Boundaries to Prioritize:**

- Homework and reading routines
- Screen limits (1-2 hours recreational, no devices during meals)
- Screens in common areas only (no digital screen in bedrooms- this is essential)
- Age-appropriate chores and responsibilities (help with dishes and take out trash etc.)
- Basic money management (saving portion of allowance)
- Respectful communication standards

Effective Approaches:

- Connect boundaries to family values
- Use logical consequences
- Create visual reminders and charts
- Hold family meetings for input
- Focus more on explanations

Sample Scripts:

- "In our family, we speak respectfully to each other."
- "When you finish your responsibilities, then you can have 30 minutes of screen time."
- "What's your plan for getting that done?"

PRETEENS (AGES 10-13)**Key Boundaries to Prioritize:**

- Digital boundaries (time limits, content rules, no devices in bedrooms)
- Social guidelines (clear expectations/parameters, communication standards)
- Growing responsibilities (chores, time management)

- Money management (save, spend, give)
- Sleep and self-care expectations

Effective Approaches:

- Create written agreements
- Involve them in boundary-setting discussions
- Allow natural consequences when safe
- Differentiate between negotiable and non-negotiable rules
- Begin transitioning to self-monitoring

Sample Scripts:

- "I understand you want more freedom. Let's talk about how responsibility and trust work together to earn you that freedom."
- "This is a 'no' right now, but we can revisit when [specific condition is met]."

TEENS (AGES 14-18)

Key Boundaries to Prioritize:

- Safety boundaries (driving, dating, parties, substances)
- Digital citizenship (social media, privacy, online footprint)
- Financial responsibilities and planning
- Academic/work commitments
- Family contribution expectations

Effective Approaches:

- Frame boundaries in terms of values and safety
- Create *collaborative* agreements
- Connect privileges with responsibilities
- Focus on developing internal boundaries
- Gradually increase autonomy/freedom with demonstrated maturity

Sample Scripts:

- "I'm not saying 'no' to control you. I'm saying 'no' because I care about your well-being."
- "This boundary is about your safety, which is non-negotiable. Within that parameter, what would you suggest?"

BOUNDARY TROUBLESHOOTING

FOR THE NEGOTIATOR

Signs: Constant bargaining, wearing you down *Strategy:*

- State boundary once clearly
- Avoid debates
- Use "broken record" technique
- Walk away confidently

FOR THE BOUNDARY TESTER

Signs: Repeatedly challenges limits *Strategy:*

- Stay calm and consistent
- Expect testing as normal development
- Use "When/Then" statements
- Implement logical/connected consequences when necessary

FOR THE EMOTIONAL REACTOR

Signs: Big emotions in response to boundaries *Strategy:*

- Validate feelings while maintaining boundary
- Stay calm during emotional storms
- Offer comfort within the boundary
- Teach self-calming practices and help-coregulate emotions

FOR THE SNEAKY CIRCUMVENTOR

Signs: Finding loopholes, secret boundary-breaking *Strategy:*

- Address patterns, not just incidents
- Connect circumvention to trust
- Problem-solve underlying needs
- Find areas where they can assert their will honestly and support those

EFFECTIVE BOUNDARY COMMUNICATION

THREE-PART BOUNDARY FORMULA:

1. **Connect:** Acknowledge feelings *"I understand you really want to keep playing..."*
2. **Set boundary:** State limit clearly *"...and it's time to put the tablet away now."*
3. **Explain briefly:** Link to values/safety *"Our family limits screen time because we value face-to-face connection or healthy brain development."*
4. **Follow-through:** Boundaries are about what YOU *will do*, not just verbal prompts: *"Either you handover the tablet or I will take it away."*

THE CALM APPROACH:

- **Clear** - Simple, direct language
- **Assured** - Confident tone and body language
- **Loving** - Maintain emotional connection
- **Matter-of-fact** - Avoid emotional reactions

BUILDING INTERNAL BOUNDARIES

The ultimate goal is helping children develop their *own* internal limits:

Progression:

1. External boundaries (parent-enforced)
2. Co-created boundaries (parent-child collaboration)
3. Supervised self-regulation (testing with safety net)
4. Internal boundaries (self-governance)

Promoting self-regulation:

- Ask reflective questions: "How do you feel when you get enough sleep vs. not enough?"
- Notice natural consequences: "I notice you seem irritable after too much screen time."
- Practice decision-making: "What's your plan for getting homework done today?"

REMEMBER:

- Consistent boundaries create security
- Children actually want/need boundaries, even when they push
- Fewer, consistently-enforced boundaries are better than many inconsistent ones
- Your confidence in setting limits helps your child feel safe
- Boundaries are an expression of love, not a limitation of it

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