

Setting Limits for the Summertime

The summer is here for some and just around the corner for others. As school lets out parents need to think about focusing on how their children will spend the summers. For teens it may mean a first time job and some extra spending money, for younger children it may mean trips to the local pool or spending time with the neighbors. To keep your child safe this summer think about the limits you are going to set for them. The limits you set for your child are like guardrails on a bridge – they provide a sense of security. Setting limits tells a child, "I care about you, I want you to be safe, and I want you to act responsibly so you'll learn to get along happily with others." Take care, however, not to overwhelm you children with rigid control. You are more likely to be effective if you focus on the limits you feel are most important.

The limits you set should protect children from physical harm, protect property, and protect children and others from psychological harm.

Before you set a limit, ask yourself: Is this rule really important? Am I willing to deal with the conflicts that will arise if my child disregards the limit?

You also need to consider whether your child is capable of doing what you expect of her. For instance, it is inappropriate to demand that toddlers keep their rooms clean or to expect boisterous 10-year-olds to always remember their mealtime manners. Remember, if children can't be good at succeeding, then they are easily tempted to be good at failing. With this in mind, set limits so your child can succeed.

In addition to negative limits, such as, "Don't hit your brother," or "Don't throw that in the house," children need positive limits to deal with their emotions. For example, you might say to your child, "When you get angry, tell me how you feel – tell me you're angry!" This will show your child another way of handling anger.

It goes without saying that limits must be enforced consistently. This provides an atmosphere of security and direction for children. Once a limit is set, the child should know clearly when it applies – one time, some of the time, or all of the time. A child's respect for parents and for authority in general is likely to diminish if the rules keep changing and enforcement is inconsistent.

The ultimate goal in setting limits is to help children develop self-control and self-direction. You can help them practice these skills by talking with them about problems and encouraging them to suggest guidelines for their own behavior.

And finally, remember to re-examine the limits you set for your child. Is the rule you laid down when she was ten years old still appropriate now that she's fourteen years old? And do the limits you set at the beginning of the school year also apply to the summer, what other factors need to be considered now that your children are not in school. As your child matures and situations change, so should your limits.

For more information on this or other youth development related issues please contact the Henry County University of Missouri Extension Office at 660-885-5556.