



Boundaries

Understanding, Setting, and Holding

UNDERSTANDING BOUNDARIES

For people (particularly children) who have experienced high levels of toxic stress in early life, it can be helpful to use the word and framework of boundaries, instead of rules. Using rules can often trigger a threat response and fierce resistance. The boundary approach is more effective because it has shown to be more tolerable to children with sensitized nervous systems, and they are able to understand that boundaries exist to keep them safe. Children often feel as though adults have the intention of taking their power away when we use language around enforcing rules. It is important to explain that boundaries (similar to rules) are something that are all around us, all the time. They exist for our physical, emotional, social and community safety and well-being.

BOUNDARIES DEFINED

In her book, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, professor and researcher Dr. Brené Brown simply defines boundaries as “what’s okay and what’s not okay.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF BOUNDARIES

Dr. Brown’s research reveals the importance of boundaries, noting that the most compassionate, wholehearted people are also the most boundaried people. What often happens, Brown describes, is that by dismissing behaviors that are not okay, we are left feeling resentful and hateful. We are able to stay loving, generous, and compassionate when we are straightforward with what is okay and what’s

“When we fail to set boundaries and hold people accountable, we feel used and mistreated.”

— Dr. Brené Brown

not okay, in defining and holding clear boundaries. Boundaries are critical for creating and maintaining healthy relationships.

Here’s an example:

Situation 1

In a game of Nerf War, your child opponent is playing too rough and purposefully aiming for your face and hurting you. You keep playing anyway, and become frustrated. Finally, you’ve had all you can take—now you are angry. You take the toys away, and say “That’s it! You’re being mean and hurting me on purpose. You’re done with Nerf War until you can play kindly.”

Consider another approach:

Situation 2

Before the game starts, you lay out the boundaries: “It’s okay to play for 30 minutes, as long as it feels safe, fun, and fair for everyone. It’s not okay to aim for faces and other sensitive body parts, or shoot at close range.” Then, if the boundary gets broken, you kindly say “We have to end now because it was getting unsafe. That was fun, and I look forward to trying again soon. I’ll bet next time we will be able to play safer for longer. How about we build that cool new Lego set with the rest of our time together?”





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In Situation 2, boundaries are clearly stated up front. Since the boundary was crossed, the game ended. There was no punishment, no shame, just the upholding of the clear boundary and the natural consequence that came with it.

SETTING AND HOLDING BOUNDARIES

Incorporating boundaries is essential when caring for and working with children with trauma-related needs. Boundaries are very important—they are not division; instead, they help facilitate and maintain trust and connection.

Setting and holding boundaries is an important skill. Simply laying out boundaries is not enough—as individuals we must follow through and consistently hold boundaries. By doing this, we avoid resentment, and we build trust and protect the connection in a relationship.

Dr. Brene Brown uses the acronym BIG to help us understand why setting and holding healthy boundaries is important:

BIG = **B**oundaries need to be in place, so I can maintain my **I**ntegrity and keep making **G**enerous assumptions about you.

For children with a history of early trauma, be sure to steer away from a punitive, or behavioral approach to discipline. Boundaries are about emotional and physical safety. Communicating them as such is an important part of setting and holding boundaries.





Below is an adapted boundary exercise from Brené Brown's COURAGEworks curriculum, for use with children with a sensitized nervous system.

This worksheet has been designed to guide a discussion between two people about boundaries. Fill it out using language that always conveys care and safety.

Definition of boundaries: Dr. Brené Brown defines boundaries as "what's okay and what's not okay."

Boundaries are something that are all around us, all the time. They exist for our physical, emotional, social and community safety and well-being. We all have our own boundaries. Pick a topic to discuss the boundaries around

(Examples: Common vs private spaces in the household, borrowing clothes between siblings, personal space, how it's acceptable to talk to each other, coming and going from home, having friends over, etc.)

TOPIC: _____

What is okay: _____

What is NOT okay: _____

This is what happens when you do what is okay: _____

This is what happens when you do what is NOT okay: _____

