

Boundaries and Children's Personal Safety

Parents & Educators

Children have a natural desire to explore the world and test boundaries. Recently, there has been increased focus on how boundaries affect child personal safety. Overwhelmingly, the evidence points to the importance of personal boundaries in keeping children aware of potentially dangerous situations and how this can help reduce the risk of sexual victimization.

Understanding the Risks

Child sexual offenders often try to break personal boundaries, gain trust and normalize sexual activity between adults and children. Children with an understanding of personal boundaries are more likely to recognize inappropriate behaviours which could disrupt the grooming process, thereby reducing their risk of sexual exploitation.

Starting Point

Children crossing boundaries

Building personal boundaries should begin when children are very young; beginning with pointing out when children push the boundaries of others. It is important to re-establish those boundaries and consistently explain how they have been crossed.

Examples of children crossing boundaries ("roles"):

- The child answers questions on behalf of the parent
- The child wants to be a part of adult conversations
- The child acts "in charge" of the parent and siblings
- The child wants access to adult material and information (movies, TV shows, and websites, etc.)
- The child clings to the adult s/he has just met



Adults crossing boundaries

Respecting children's personal boundaries teaches them how they should expect to be treated. When adults cross children's boundaries, it compromises their sense of safety and security.

Examples of crossing emotional boundaries:

- Using shame (e.g. "I can't believe you did this! What kind of a person are you?")
- Using sarcasm (e.g. "Way to go, Einstein. A two-year-old knows how to do that.")
- Using guilt (e.g. "I do so much for you. Can't you do this one thing for me?")
- Demeaning someone (e.g. "Everyone knows you have no talent.")
- Placing a child in a role as an adult's confidant/best friend ("I am so lonely. I am glad you are here to listen to me.")

Examples of crossing physical boundaries:

- Insisting children hug or kiss others
- Continuing to touch a child when they don't want you to, e.g. tickling (excluding emergency situations)
- Hitting a child

Examples of crossing sexual boundaries:

- Telling children sexual jokes
- Showing children sexually explicit material
- Sharing sexually explicit information
- Engaging in sexual activity in the presence of children
- Engaging in sexual activity with children

Tips to help children learn clear personal boundaries

1

Model appropriate boundaries for children and re-establish boundaries when they are crossed.

If a child invades personal space, asks personal questions or assumes adult roles and responsibilities (such as disciplining a sibling, etc.), supportively re-establish appropriate behaviour.

2

Teach children to respect personal space and privacy. Establish family privacy for using the bathroom, bathing and changing. Designate a personal space in the home for each person's belongings (a bedroom, closet, drawers and/or shelves, etc.).

3

Establish and reinforce the role of the children within the family. Establish the line when children want to listen to adult conversations pertaining to adult decision-making and adult-related topics. Children should be separated from adult issues.

4

Avoid involving children in adult relationship issues such as intimacy trouble. This clarifies the child's role in the family and builds their security.

5

Teach children to share with a trusted adult if an older child or adult breaches their personal boundaries.

