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Principles of Limit Setting

The most important thing to your child is your love and approval. Because of this need for your love, your child will want to respond to and meet your expectations. By keeping your expectations consistent, reasonable, and predictable you can help your child gain control over his or her behavior.

- Reasonable limits make your child feel protected by some one who understands the world better than he does. Knowing the rules helps him relax.
- Most children do not need an abundance of rules. Your child will understand and accept limits better when she helps make the rules through a process of discussion that includes the reasons for the rules (e.g., safety). If you are having to make rules all the time or having to discipline often, consult your primary care health professional.
- When you make a request, get your child's attention, then only ask once. If he does not follow your instructions, take him with you while you complete the task. Praise any cooperation. This is called "one request and then move."
- Although it is best when all caregivers use rules consistently, your child can also adapt to different rules used consistently by different people or in different settings. It is better to expect your child to adapt than to openly clash with other over differences.
- Sometimes rules should be enforced flexibly to meet the needs of a "special occasion" (e.g., staying up later for a special event). This is best done before your child demands such a change to avoid the appearance that you were manipulated. Instead of weakness, this demonstrates a desirable amount of flexibility.

Following through consistently, yet flexibly, on expectations for behavior is a difficult balance for any parent to achieve. The following factors can make this even harder:

- Feeling reluctant to enforce consistent rules of limits because of concerns about causing your child extra stress, or feeling uncomfortable handling your child's anger when a limit is set
- Widely differing expectations for behavior among your child's caregivers
- Stress in other areas of your life
- Too many or too rigid rules
- A history or being exposed to anger in your own life, which can make it more difficult to handle angry responses from your child
- Not having as much fun time together with your child as you would like

If you feel any of these factors are relevant to your family, consider discussing them with your child's primary care health professional or another supportive profession (e.g., religious leader, social worker, counselor).

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