



Keys to Happy Family Living

Christian Living Series

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Lesson 11 – Setting Limits

"You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, 'Beware that you do not go up on the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death.'" (Exodus 19:12, NASB).

Happy parenthood involves the willing acceptance of the task of training children. It is natural that we should be puzzled from time to time by the behavior of our children. Growing up in a world of television, baby sitters, and nuclear fission is something new. A great change has taken place in family relationships, and most of us have moments of doubt: are we being too strict or too lenient?

In the midst of a rapidly changing world, there are still some fixed points for the guidance of Christian parents. There are some methods that you can follow for training your children in the way they should go. Four of these are setting limits, supervision, help, and a positive approach. This lesson will consider setting limits; Lesson 12 will discuss the other three. These rules of action are emphasized in the Word of God as principles for Christian living. (Study Galatians 6:1; 1 Peter 5:2-3; 1 Timothy 3:4; Exodus 20 and related verses that you may find.)

The necessity for limits

Whenever one life crosses another, it is necessary to establish certain guidelines to make possible friendly relations. *These guidelines*, whether written or followed by mutual consent, *prescribe and limit activity--do's and don'ts*. We refer to them here as limits. The fewer limits the better, but the ones you set must be firm, definite, fair, and consistent. From pre-school age on up, limits are necessary. In the home or neighborhood the smallest children need certain limits pertaining to safety, sharing, destroying, hurting others, taking turns, and respecting others' feelings.

It should be understood that children will never maintain limits perfectly. Parents often ask, "How often must I tell that child to behave before he will do it?" The answer is, "Constantly." Children have their ups and downs just as adults do. However, the pre-school child does make a beginning toward accepting limits.

For example, a teacher was showing a three-year-old boy the meaning of sharing toys with other children. Some time later she was looking on as he and another boy were playing together. The three-year-old slipped up to the other child, who was playing with a little car, grabbed it out of his hand, and said, "Let's share." How you handle such an incident is important. This little boy was just beginning to learn the concept of sharing, even though he misunderstood. He needed some careful teaching, not a scolding.

Agreement on limits

The limits set in any family should be mutually agreeable to both the father and the mother; otherwise, children learn to play one parent against the other. To illustrate, at a banquet in a church one evening Jimmy whispered to his mother, "May I go to the car and play the radio?" "No, you may not!" she replied. So Jimmy watched until his mother was engaged in conversation. He then quietly turned to his father and said, "How about the keys to the car, Dad, so I can go out and listen to the radio?" Without thinking, Dad reached in his pocket, gave his son the keys, and Jimmy disappeared outside. When Dad and Mom came to themselves and realized what had happened, they found it hard to apply discipline because they themselves had disagreed. This is not an unusual occurrence, is it? It is important that husbands and wives be in agreement on limits. The older children become, the more clever they are in pitting one parent against the other. Therefore, it is important that from the early stages of your marriage you accept the fact that whenever one person's life crosses another there must be some definite understanding so that the relationship may develop smoothly.

Limits and neighbors

When it comes to training children, the responsibility for carrying out limits lies with the parent. The character and the understanding of the parent are much more trustworthy than the understanding of the child.

The following experience of one parent illustrates the fact that your limits may not be appreciated by your children and seemingly are not always appreciated by the neighbors.

This parent felt that her child should not cross the busy highway on his bicycle. The other parents in the neighborhood said to their children, "If the rest of the mothers say their children can do it, you can do it." The gang would go to this woman's house and plead, but she would say, "No! you can't do it." Her child was distraught. "Everybody else's mother says we can go. You always keep us from going" -- as much as to say, "What kind of a mother are you?"

After this happened a few times, the children went once again with the same request. All the other mothers said they could go. Finally, the harassed mother yielded to the pressure and let them go. Suddenly she was hailed as a wonderful mother because the children could have their way. But they had hardly gotten started when the telephone rang. One of the neighbors had called, saying, "Did you tell the children they could

cross the street?" "Why, yes." The neighbor replied, "We were depending on you not to let your child go."

To have a happy home you may hold standards or values that will seem odd to the neighbors; or your neighbors may silently respect you. In either case, you had better do what is right before God, not what is right in your child's eyes, or perhaps in the eyes of the mother next door. And if the mother next door doesn't like this, you still must be pleasant to her from your heart. This requires complete consecration and yieldedness to God.

Limits outside the home

It is important for small children to have supervised contacts outside the home. This is important because limits outside the home are different from those within the home. Adults not in the family will react differently also. A child's first attempts to approach other children or his reactions to being approached by other children are usually similar to those at home. If he is accustomed to taking what he wants, asking for what he wants, or looking longingly at what he wants, he will do so outside the home. However, the response to his approach by other children or adults may be different from what he is accustomed to at home. His approach, successful at home, may be unsuccessful outside the home.

To illustrate, a four-year-old girl, the only child in the family, and the pride and joy of her parents, went to nursery school. She had learned her manners well. Whenever she wanted something, she would say, "Please, may I have it?" Her parents would then grant her most of her requests. At school she walked up to a little girl nearby and said, "Please, may I have that doll?" "No," was the answer. The four-year-old returned to her mother with a puzzled look on her face and explained, "I said please, and she won't give it to me." The mother, too, looked puzzled. The teacher told the mother and child that what might be a successful approach in the home would not necessarily work outside the home. The other child had rights also. It is important that a young child should have such contacts at her own age level outside the home, so that she can learn the facts of life four-year-old style.

Adults have limits

The following excerpts from a father's letter to his son at graduation time, though written as humor, convey a vital message:

Dear Son,

I'm sure you are thrilled by the idea of taking your place at last in adult affairs--a station of life you probably look upon as a time when "big people" will stop telling you to do things ... or not to do things Your dad has found out that the chains of adult life are wrought of stiffer stuff than the feeble fetters of childhood. Believe me, no one ever suffered a furrowed brow from such simple commands as "Eat your cereal" "Do your homework" "Report for band

practice." What once may have seemed a terribly harsh order, "Put away your comic book," will pale into insignificance when compared with "Cut out all pastries and sweets."

The bigger you get, the bigger other people seem to get--if not bigger in stature, then bigger in authority.

For example, did you see the look on dad's face when the Internal Revenue man ordered him to report to the collector's office with his last year's tax receipts? ... When a traffic officer says, "Pull over to the curb," dad pulls. When grandmother says, "Roll up the window," dad rolls up I just want to prepare you for a lifetime of saying, "Yes, sir," to master sergeants, shop foremen, loan company executives, bank tellers, tradesmen, public officials, car dealers, game wardens, and a host of other people you never dreamed were your superiors. Even the most politely phrased commands, like "Please remit" or "Kindly step back in the bus" are still commands. Ushers will order you down an aisle; headwaiters will tell you where to sit; courts will summon you for jury duty; the city hall will notify you to shovel the snow off your sidewalk.

You will be dragged off to parties at other people's houses, and dragged out of bed by people who come to your house. You will be kept off the grass by policemen and kept up by week end guests. You will be put on committees and put off busses. This is the true life beyond commencement. Congratulations and good luck.

Dad

P. S. Get a haircut for graduation.

This letter illustrates some of the reasons why small children need to begin learning about limits and living by them.

The following quotation gives some additional reasons which point out basic needs that limits can help meet:

[God's] love (Hebrews 12:6) meets a real need; His love is strong enough and wise enough to set limits. These God-given limits mean wonderful, comforting freedom from worry and uncertainty

The most important aspect of being an adequate father is the acceptance and handling of authority ... accepting someone's authority over and responsibility for you, accepting the place of authority over and responsibility over others.

Without the setting of limits, by virtue of authority, there is no security. Knowing exactly where "the old man" draws the line, just what are the limits, and that they are well enforced means a happy, efficient organization. A taut ship is a happy ship.

The setting of limits is inherent in the need for authority and security. Just as our God sets limits for us, enforcing them by chastisement, so should we with our children. The

setting of intelligent, thoughtful, reasonable limits is a God-delegated duty--limits that are in line with the needs of the child and appropriate to his age, understanding and moral values.

We need to avoid meeting our own needs or whims in disciplining the child while striving to meet his--in keeping with moral principles and a Christian testimony As the child grows in knowledge and understanding of God's Word, authority is transferred from you, the natural father, to God, the heavenly Father. ... Have you surrendered, or only complied with, God's authority?¹

¹Norwell J. Peterson, "The Father--God's Surrogate," *Christian Medical Journal*, January-February, 1957, pages 9, 10.

Study Assignment for Lesson II

1. What do we mean by "setting limits?" What is the reason for them and how do they pertain to training children?
2. Why should children be taught limits outside the home?
3. Contrast the limits of adulthood with those of childhood.
4. What is the relationship between the authority of parents and the authority of God? Between security and setting limits?
5. What problems are involved regarding neighbors and their setting of limits for a happy home?

Self-Check Test II

Mark the following statements "True" or "False."

- _____ 1. Happy parenthood involves the willing acceptance of the task of training children.
- _____ 2. The great change which has taken place in family relationships in recent years has removed all fixed points for the guidance of Christian parents.
- _____ 3. Children can be expected to maintain limits perfectly.
- _____ 4. The limits set in any family should be mutually agreeable to both parents.

- _____ 5. The ultimate responsibility for carrying out limits lies with the child.
- _____ 6. The limits set by a family should always conform to those set by other families.
- _____ 7. Limits outside the home are identical with those within the home.
- _____ 8. The child who has learned to get his own way at home will be sure always to get his own way outside the home.
- _____ 9. One of the joys of adulthood is that limits and restraints no longer need to be observed.
- _____ 10. The setting of intelligent, thoughtful, reasonable limits is a God-delegated duty of parents.

Visit <http://biblicalcounselinginsights.com/keys-to-happy-family-living-series/answers/> for the answers to these questions.

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