

Framework for Setting Limits Effectively During Shutdown

Clarity

Know what you want your child to do (or not do). State it in a way your child can understand. Be specific. *Don't over-explain. Don't moralize. Don't nag or cajole. State, don't ask.*

Parental authority and confidence is more important than ever right now; and if you're not feeling authoritative or confident, you have to fake it till you make it! Vague statements like "I'll play with you later," or using questions instead of statements like "Should you be acting this way at the table?" can contribute to children's sense of discomfort during troubled times. Children want to know: what's happening? Who's in charge? Tips for achieving greater clarity:

- Make a picture schedule, comic-strip style, showing the key parts of your day.
- Break down big tasks into smaller, clearer packages. Instead of "get this room cleaned up," try "you put away the train tracks, then I'll help you clean up the lego."
- Use a timer to help your child learn to play independently while you get work done. Start with a timer set for 10 minutes and a specific activity: "You work on these puzzles while I do some of my own work. When the timer rings, we'll play Candyland together." Gradually increase the time on the timer to an amount that is manageable for your child's age and temperament.

Consistency

Ensure that all adults are in agreement. Enforce the limit over time and in a range of situations. *The more inconsistent the limit, the more your child will challenge it. Don't let disagreements between adults result in inconsistency for the child.*

It's hard to stay consistent when we're all functioning with so many unknowns day-to-day. Many schedules and routines have been upended, and children and parents have lost consistent connections with friends, extended family and favorite locations like restaurants, libraries, museums, and playgrounds. Finding ways to offer daily consistency will help make days feel smoother for you and your child. Consistency is a balm for this world-turned-upside-down feeling. Tips for achieving greater consistency:

- Find something in all three segments of your day (morning, afternoon, evening) that can always be the same. It might be sitting with your child for breakfast, taking a walk after lunch, playing a board game after dinner.
- Stick firmly to rules that you've always had; this is not the time to loosen them.
- If you're living somewhere else, try to find ways of making it feel like home. Recreating an aspect of a child's bedroom, displaying familiar books, or sending away for some prints of family photos to stick up on the fridge can be concrete reminders of consistency.

Follow-Through

Give limit-setting your full attention. Give approval when a direction is followed, and step in actively when it is not. Be prepared to enforce consequences if you need to. *Don't make unreasonable threats or promises. Don't set a limit you aren't ready to enforce. Don't fear conflict.*

We are all suffering right now from feelings of unpredictability and confusion. Think how good and reassuring it feels when things are concrete and certain. When you follow-through on limits that you set, you give your child that reassuring feeling. If they push against your limits, it's because they need to make sure those limits are really there. Tips for following through:

- Investing time in following through now will help limit-setting be easier in the long run. If you tell your child to do (or not do) something, you have to be ready to make it happen-- that's how your child learns to trust your authority.
- Use clarity as your ally. When you say, "Be a good listener," you set yourself up for a difficult follow-through because your direction is vague and subjective. Instead try specifics, "Once you've gotten dressed I'll play that game with you." (Follow-through=no game until the clothes are on.)
- This is not the time to use threats or bribes. They actually weaken your authority, especially when children stop fearing the threat or caring about the bribe.

Age-Appropriateness

Be sure your expectations are reasonable for your child's age and development. *Don't set expectations too high; you set your child up to fail. Don't set expectations too low; you encourage helplessness.*

It's easy to get stuck treating your child one way, and forget to adapt to their growing abilities, especially when you're together all the time! While daily life might feel numbingly static, your child is still developing-- cognitively, physically, emotionally, socially-- watch for ways to acknowledge and appreciate that growth. Tips for setting age-appropriate expectations:

- Include your child in chores. You might be surprised how much they can do! Folding laundry, food prep, even mopping and washing windows!
- Don't forget about milestones. This might be the perfect time to toilet train, give up the pacifier, go from crib to bed. While it involves yet another change, it might be a big confidence boost for you and your child during a time of overall low morale.
- Take advantage of flexibility with time. Instead of putting your 3 year old's shoes on for him as if you're late for school, let him take his time and do it himself-- where are you rushing to? Give your child some extra time to accomplish independent self-help skills: dressing, pouring their own cereal, coat-zipping, even shoe-tying for older children.
- Be sure you aren't setting expectations too high. Children's ability to play alone, to see other points of view, to understand time concepts, and to manage their emotions are all developmental-- they can't be rushed or forced.