

Parenting Kids with Trauma: Setting Healthy Boundaries for Them & Yourself

Why Boundaries Matter

Children who have experienced trauma often struggle with understanding and respecting boundaries. Trauma may have taught them that boundaries are unsafe, inconsistent, or nonexistent. However, healthy boundaries create a sense of safety, predictability, and trust—key factors in healing.

As foster parents, setting firm yet compassionate boundaries is essential not only for the child's development but also for your well-being.



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Understanding Trauma's Impact on Boundaries

Children with trauma often:

- Struggle with trusting adults
Have difficulty understanding personal space or emotional limits
- Test limits to see if caregivers will remain consistent
- Fear abandonment when boundaries are enforced
Rather than viewing boundary-setting as punitive, approach it as an act of care that teaches life skills and emotional regulation.



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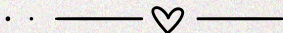
Boundaries for the Child: Creating Structure & Safety

Techniques for Teaching Boundaries

- Use Clear and Consistent Rules
Keep rules simple and predictable: “We use kind words in this house.”
Follow through with gentle, consistent consequences.



- Teach Emotional Boundaries
Help kids identify emotions and express them appropriately: “It’s okay to be mad, but it’s not okay to hit.”
Use role-playing to practice responses to frustration or stress.



➤ Model Boundaries in Action

Verbally express your own limits: “I need a moment to calm down before we talk about this.”

Let them see you respecting others' boundaries.



➤ Encourage "Safe Choices" Instead of Control

Offer alternatives: “You can walk away or use your words when you're upset.”

Reinforce that boundaries are about safety and care, not punishment.

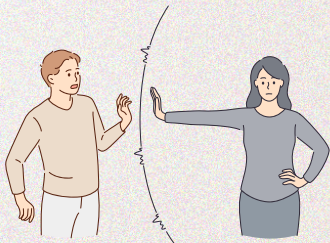


➤ Use Visual Tools

Boundary charts with green/yellow/red zones (safe, warning, not allowed)

“Safe words” or signals when they feel overwhelmed

**See Yes and No chart



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Boundaries for the Foster Parent:

Protecting Your Own Well-being

Parenting a child with trauma can be emotionally exhausting. Setting boundaries for yourself is critical.

Techniques for Maintaining Personal Boundaries

- **Recognize Your Limits**
It's okay to say "no" when overwhelmed.
Set realistic expectations—progress takes time.
- **Create Personal Space**
Have designated "quiet time" or a personal retreat space.
Teach children to respect personal time by setting up visual cues (like a "Mom/Dad's Break Time" card).

- **Don't Absorb Their Trauma**
It's not your job to “fix” their pain—your job is to provide stability.
Separate your emotions from their behaviors: “This behavior is about their past, not about me.”
- **Practice Self-Care Without Guilt**
Take regular breaks to recharge (exercise, therapy, hobbies).
Connect with other foster parents for support.
- **Establish Emotional Boundaries**
Avoid engaging in power struggles. Instead, calmly enforce consequences.
Recognize that their trauma-driven reactions are not personal attacks.



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Handling Pushback: What to Expect & How to Respond

Trauma has often taught children that boundaries = rejection.

Common Reactions & How to Respond

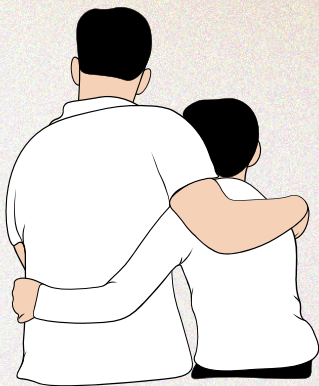
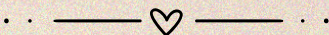
➤ **Anger or Defiance** → Stay calm, repeat the boundary.
“I hear that you’re upset, but the rule stays the same.” . . . ——— ♡ ——— . . .

➤ **Testing Limits** → Follow through with consequences.
“You threw your toy after I asked you not to. We’ll put it away for now.”
Guilt-Tripping or Manipulation → Be firm and kind.
“I care about you, and my answer is still no.”



➤ **Emotional Outbursts → Validate feelings but hold the boundary.**

“It’s okay to feel angry, but I won’t allow screaming at me.”



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The Long-Term Goal: Teaching Self-Regulation

Teaching boundaries isn't just about enforcing rules—it's about equipping kids with skills they'll need for life. Over time, children who learn healthy boundaries develop:

- ✓ A stronger sense of safety and trust
- ✓ Better emotional regulation
- ✓ Healthier relationships



Date: _____

Name: _____

Yes

No

Teacher Initials:

Parent Approval:

How to Use your Yes and No chart

What is a Yes and No chart?

This chart is to be used to help kids understand what good and bad behavior is. Do not use this tool for punishment or to encourage perfectionism. It is a parenting tool for kids that have never had boundaries or rules in their home. It is a training tool to encourage kids to follow rules.



How does it work?

It is a very simple tool to use, but very effective. When a child is interacting with the family/school/other kids/ friends simply pay attention to what they are doing.

Do they do anything that shows value or should be encouraged to continue? Give them a YES in the YES column.

If they do a behavior that we want to try to stop, put this in the NO column.



At the end of the day, if the child has more YES's than No's, they will receive a reward that you choose.

Examples of good rewards would be a better dessert after they finish dinner, a small toy, or more time on their electronics.

In some harder cases, this YES and NO Chart will need to be done at school with the teacher. This should help the teacher with bad behaviors at school. Schools and teachers will sometimes resist using this, but a good teacher will understand it's value and will want to help. It works and the kids will do better. It just takes time. You may want to tell the teacher that they can use this with all the students for better behavior. They do need to know that there is no punishment for bad behavior which will help them participate.

Important to Note:

At first the child will not know what is good and bad behavior and will be showing a lot of no's on their report. This is to be expected and not punished. They will want to do better the next day because they want the reward. This is a learning experience. Make sure to praise the good behavior when done and never discuss the bad unless they had a bad day. Then you can talk about how they can try again tomorrow.



Tips for having good days:

If your child is struggling to understand what a YES behavior is, you can help with ideas like: You can give someone a hug. Ask how their day is going. Help with a task.

When starting out make sure you notice very small YES behaviors. They need this encouragement to continue participation. When they start showing more independent decisions, you can make it harder, by advising them they will need to do the YES behavior without being told for it to count. If they are struggling doing the chart for more than a month and you do not see improvement, please talk to your child's therapist.

If you have a caseworker, certification worker, therapist, and/or GAL, please make sure to let them know what you are trying and give them progress reports.



Like all behavior tools, this will take time for them to understand and it will be tedious on your end to continually have to mark on the chart. There will be days you don't want to do this anymore or have to think or rewards again. Don't be discouraged! It works if you are willing to do the work and be consistent. Consistency will help them catch on faster.

You know your child the best. If your child doesn't care about video games or tablet time, don't use this as a reward. If they love spending time with you, use that! You can always do a game together or watch a movie.

If you wanted to make a better incentive, you can always do a larger prize for a week's worth of good behavior. Like Pizza for dinner, a trip to the zoo, or they pick the movie to watch for movie night. Be creative. If you are struggling, ask family or there's always CHAT GPT!

