

HOW BEST TO ESTABLISH LIMITS AND ROUTINES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN: Important Considerations When Building the Foundation of the Self-Disciplined Person

Peter Ernest Haiman, Ph.D.

Children experience the ebb and flow of normally powerful social, emotional and physical needs. Their behavior also reveals developmentally appropriate and strong interests and curiosity. When parents regularly meet these childhood needs and drives in a responsive and timely manner, they build the foundation for their youngster to live within an ordered and structured interpersonal and physical environment. By appropriately meeting their child's needs parents provide their infants, toddlers and young children a security that builds trust in the child. Living in an environment that derives its order, in the first six years of life, from trustworthy parental behavior is vitally important if a child is to develop a healthy self-discipline and live an ordered life thereafter. Without a consistent sense of trust and security provided by parents the child will not have the foundation upon which the youngster can develop self-discipline later on.

Routines and the discipline of limits also provide a sense of order to the child. They, therefore, can encourage the formation of a child-felt sense of security. However, how the routines and limits are established and implemented by parents is as important as the routines and limits themselves. If parents enact routines and limits in a rigid, unresponsive manner or carry out discipline in an authoritarian way, they will create angry, uncooperative and resistant children.

When children are about 1 or 2 years of age they strive for a personal autonomy and as a result they become willful. This begins a significant period in the life of the child. When children start to manifest this normal behavior, it is very important for parents to involve them, as much as is reasonably possible, in the development and execution of the routines and the creation of the limits.

If limits or decisions are made for a person, s/he usually resists, forgets and/or does not follow them. However, as a large body of research has demonstrated, when a person is involved in making the very limits and decisions which will structure their life, the individual will develop a sense of personal ownership of those limits and decisions. It is as if they become part of the limits and the limits become part of them. The decisions are their decisions. As a result, the individual is far more likely to abide by those limits than if the limits are made for them by somebody else.

The following scenarios incorporate this principle or provide adaptations of it. They are examples of what parents can say to their toddler or preschool-aged child in typical childrearing situations.

Scenario 1

To encourage a normally willful 1 or 2 year-old child, in the morning, to follow the routines of

getting dressed and eating breakfast: “Would you like to wear your blue dress or your jumper?” Or, “Would you like your milk in your Sesame Street cup or your yellow cup?” Or, “Would you like some cereal or French toast?”

Scenario 2

Motivating your children to eat their vegetables at home begins when you and your youngsters are shopping at the vegetable counter at the grocery store. “David, I need your help. What vegetables should we have for dinner tonight? Should we have peas, green broccoli trees, or beans? What vegetables should we eat tonight?”

Scenario 3

“Johnny, Mommy is tired and would like to rest with you. What book could we look at together? Choose a book and then come lie down with Mommy.”

Scenario 4

To facilitate the routine of brushing teeth at bedtime, a parent can say: “Shelly, would you like to brush your teeth with the striped toothpaste or the green toothpaste?”

Setting limits with a child often requires the parent to think and plan ahead. Here is a typical situation. You and your child are on your way to visit a park or one of your child’s friends. Before leaving, it is important to establish *with your child* how long the visit will be. Also the child should know what you both will do after the visit is over. Then, be sure to ask what kind of warning your youngster would like you to give him/her to signal that the time to leave is approaching. Some children will simply want to be told. However, it is fun for parent and child to invent a nonverbal ‘secret’ signal together.

Whatever method is selected, it is best to incorporate the following process in a manner that the child has chosen. You and your child are visiting a park or a friend. You have to leave with your child in ten minutes to go to the grocery store. “Cathy, we will be leaving in 10 minutes to go shopping.” (Then five minutes later) “Cathy, we will have to go to the grocery store in five minutes. Would you like to plan a time when we can all get together again? Why don’t you talk with your friend about it?” (Then five minutes later) “Cathy we have to leave now. Shall we come to play here again? When?”

This process gives a young child, who is not yet familiar with the passage of time, warnings about the time limit. It also involves the child in several ways. The child knows the plan of the day. The child has chosen a preferred way for her mother or father to communicate with her about the approaching time limit. And the youngster becomes involved in making plans for a subsequent visit with his/her friend.

The self-disciplined person evolves from an interpersonal relationship that has several interdependent processes. This article has presented an interactive process of communication and decision-making for parent and child. The interactive process is responsive to the youngster’s normal developmental needs both to become more independent and to exercise authority and decision-making. This process employs the child’s needs and drives constructively to build routines and limits. To involve a child in decision-making gives the child a healthy

sense of self-advocacy. However, this process should take place within a larger life context over which the parent has ultimate control. Parents set these boundaries. Within them, however, the child should be allowed to make decisions and have choices. As the child becomes more responsible, from the combination of parent-set secure boundaries and child decision-making within them, the parent can make the boundaries more flexible and extend them.

Parenting children is made enjoyable for both the parent and child when mothers and fathers are regularly in communication with their youngster, appropriately responsive to their child's normal needs, and creatively employ the strong energy of those needs to construct a healthy and ordered life for all.