

*A Practical Guide to Setting Limits*  
By John Sommers-Flanagan, Ph.D.

**This tip sheet is for parents having trouble setting firm and compassionate limits.**

Unfortunately, children are not born knowing how to deal with frustration, anger, and disappointment. This means it's our job to teach them how to deal with these difficult and sometimes unpleasant emotions.

One way to teach your child about how to handle frustration and other difficult emotions is through limit-setting. If you let your child do whatever she wants anytime she wants to, she'll have trouble learning how to cope with frustration. This can happen if parents always give their children whatever they want.

Many parents mistakenly think that when they set limits, they need to be mean or especially tough. Don't make that mistake. Good limit setters are firm, but kind and compassionate. Try to be the kind of boss you'd like to have yourself.

An effective limit-setting strategy includes the following:

1. **Set a clear limit or clear expectation**
2. **If your child appears upset or resistant, show empathy for your child's frustration, disappointment, or anger**
3. **Repeat the limit in clear language (you could also have your child repeat the limit or plan back to you)**
4. **Give your child a reasonable choice or timeline (this is especially important with strong-willed children; see below for examples)**
5. **Show more empathy by joining in with your child's unhappiness (this might include telling a story . . . if there's time)**
6. **Enforce the limit on time and with a logical consequence**
7. **Stay positive and encouraging**

**A Limit-Setting Example**

1. **Set a clear limit:** "Dinner will be ready in five minutes, so it's time to turn off your computer game."
2. **Show empathy by using feeling words:** "I know it's hard to stop doing something fun and you're feeling very upset."
3. **Repeat the limit:** "But you know it's time to stop playing computer games."
4. **Give a choice and a timeline:** "Either you can stop playing in the next two minutes, or I'll unplug the computer."
5. **Show more empathy by joining in with your child's unhappiness:** "I hate it when I have to stop doing something I love."
6. **Enforce the limit on time and with a logical consequence:** (Say what you'll do and then do what you said: If you said it will be two minutes, wait two minutes and enforce the limit; don't wait three minutes or one minute)
7. **Stay positive and encouraging:** "Even though I had to turn off your computer in the middle of your game tonight, I'm sure you'll be able to plan for this and turn it off yourself tomorrow."

Remember, although it's your job to teach your child how to become more responsible and how to cope with the frustrations of life, you won't be able to do this perfectly; no one does this perfectly. Just keep the principles in this tip-sheet in mind and practice them when you can.

