

1 The Issue

“There are a hundred events a day where I know I’m supposed to draw a line, but I have no idea where the line’s supposed to be!”

Children need clear boundaries and limits if they are to feel safe, secure, and loved. Limits are like the banks of a river. A river without banks is a big puddle. That’s a lot like a child without limits – they tend to be unpredictable and ‘flow’ in any direction. Limits are the ‘banks’ that provide structure and guidance for your child to be their best.

Children have two opposing emotional drives or needs within them. Firstly, they have the need for attachment – being connected to you, which in turn invokes feelings of well being, security, and belonging. Secondly, they also have a need for independence, which helps them differentiate from

you, their parent. No child is a carbon copy of his or her parents. This independence drive allows them to thrive, and become the most beautiful person they can possibly be.

The needs of attachment and independence need to be balanced. A child with too many limits never develops a sense of self, while one with too few limits grows up without boundaries. Setting limits is an important skill in raising a co-operative child. Here are some ideas to be a smart parent when it comes to setting limits.

2 Check it out

Think of traffic lights before you set limits.

Green Light These are your child’s behaviours you find acceptable - so you want to encourage them.

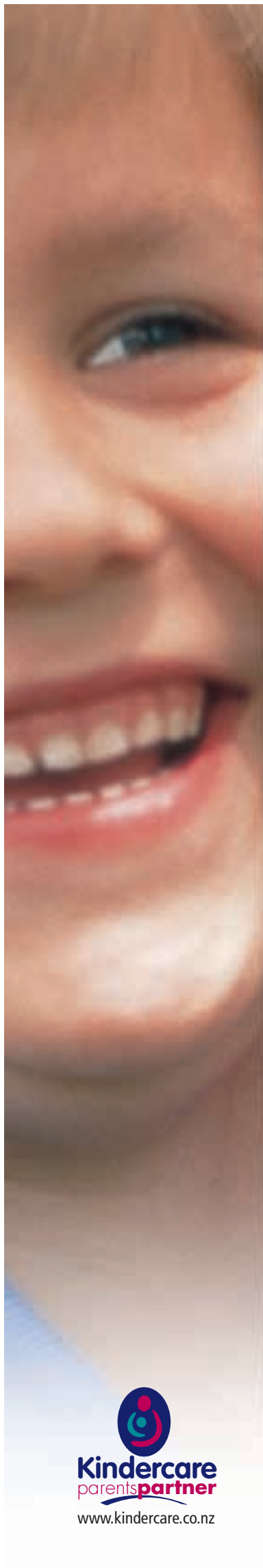
Orange Light While you mightn’t like these behaviours, you can at least tolerate them. So ignore them! If you had a rule for everything it would soon wear you out, and frustrate your child. An example of an orange light might be when your 3 year old has a temper tantrum when it’s two hours past her bedtime – ignore it because she’s simply tired.

Red Light These are the behaviours you won’t tolerate, regardless! It is these behaviours where you need to set limits for your child.

3 How to Respond

Setting limits always works best when your child feels connected to you. So work harder on the connection than you work on perfecting the technique. There is a strong connection between nurturing care, and the need for limits. We challenge our children as we nurture them. Without this balance, parents can expect without giving, or give without expecting, which results in children becoming either angry

and resistant, or spoiled and passive. All parental behaviour has one of two effects: Your actions either draws your child to you, or it pushes your child away. Effective limit setting occurs when your child feels drawn to you. Don’t set limits when your child is upset – they can’t listen. Wait until there’s peace, then draw your child physically close to you, and with a calm, firm voice, implement the following steps.



STEP 1 INVOLVE YOUR CHILD

Make sure you set limits with your child before the misbehaviour occurs. Your child must understand what the limits are. So find a quiet time and explain to your child why you need to set limits, and what the limits are. If your child is older (2 to 3 years), get them to repeat to you what the limits are.

STEP 2 CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD LIMITS

Few	Have a small number of rules. Too many will confuse your child
Fair	Rules should be consistent and fair
Clear	Rules should be easy to follow
Enforceable	Rules should be able to be enforced
Positive	State your rules in the positive

Example: Don't say, "Johnny, don't hit your sister"; try instead, "Johnny, keep your hands to yourself." Our minds cannot directly represent a negative concept. In other words, if I tell you not to think of a yellow donkey, you have to first think of a yellow donkey before you can't think of one. Use your words to describe what you want, not what you don't want.

STEP 3 DECIDE ON CONSEQUENCES

At the time of setting limits, share with your child the consequences if they break the rules. Discipline works best if your child knows what to expect if they break the rule.

STEP 4 DON'T GIVE IN

Accept and respect your own boundaries. If you don't respect the boundaries you have set, your child will never respect them either, and you'll create a vicious cycle. Learn to say "No" in a warm, gentle, and caring way. Remain calm, and be firm with the limits you have set.

STEP 5 BE FLEXIBLE

If you find your limits are not acceptable, don't keep enforcing them. If they are not appropriate, simply acknowledge it and reset them with your child.

Insights

If you haven't been consistent in enforcing your limits, it will take time for your child to learn that you are expecting them to respect your limits. After you have been away from your child all day, it's easy to ignore their misbehaviour. You naturally don't want them thinking how sweet life is at Kindercare compared to all these rules at home! So to keep the peace, and make home a happy place, you let your child break the limits. While such intentions are highly understandable (who wants their child to enjoy Kindercare more than home!), such thinking is wrong. Don't be tempted to compromise your limits. Kids push against the limits to make sure they are safe.

Be firm as you stick to your rules, but also be kind and warm. Children respond best to love. So don't shame, or blame your child – it just makes them resentful and breaks connection.

Young children have short memories. So follow through with the discipline as soon after the misbehaviour as possible. Discipline should be over as quickly as possible so positive family relationships can be re-established.