



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



Limit-Setting is Loving

Toddlers and preschoolers will never thank you for setting a limit or sticking to a rule. But **limit-setting is a necessary part of life for young children.** Limits teach children about acceptable behavior. Limits also teach them how to manage their big feelings.

Here is one way to set limits that considers your child's feelings while also sticking to the rule.

Imagine your child hit you to avoid getting in the car seat.

Step

1

If needed, stop the behavior: Get down to your child's eye level. Take your child's hand—firmly but not roughly—and tell them, "No hitting. Hitting hurts." Use a serious but calm voice.

Step

2

Name your child's feelings: "I hear you. You're feeling frustrated. You can say, *I don't like the car seat!* I know it's hard to sit still."

Step

3

Be clear about the limit: "Children use the car seat whenever we drive somewhere. That's a safety rule."



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Step

4

Offer an acceptable choice: “You can hop like a rabbit into the car seat. Or I can lift you up and fly you into the car seat. What would you like to do?”

Step

5

If needed, *calmly* step in to help: “You are having trouble deciding, so today I’ll lift you into the car seat.”

This approach helps because it:

- Shows your child you understand what they are feeling.
- Explains the expectation. Limit-setting is also teaching. If we just say, “no hitting,” then children don’t learn what they *can* do to communicate angry feelings.
- Gives children a choice. Choices give children a sense of control. Make sure that both options you offer are acceptable.
- Sticks with the limit, even if your child doesn’t cooperate. Over time, children learn that rules are for real.

Limit-setting is often not a fun part of parenting. But **it’s important to learn how to set limits in ways that support your relationship with your child.** Setting limits is part of parenting all the way through the teen years! Practicing now will help later.

Have more questions? Talk to your child’s healthcare provider or one of the professionals supporting your family.

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