



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



Setting Limits With Preschoolers

Preschoolers are growing up! But they still have **big feelings that they can't always control**. Limits help kids feel safe. Your preschooler will still test limits to see what happens. If they get the same response every time, they will eventually stop testing.

Remember that being too harsh with limits won't help your child behave. They can't learn when they feel shame or fear. Being too loose with limits won't help behavior either. If your child thinks that they can change your mind or ignore you, they will push back more. Young children need limits to develop self-control. **This takes time**. They learn it gradually.

What can you do?

Focus on prevention. Try these tips to avoid or reduce tricky moments with your child.

Let your growing preschooler make some choices for themselves.

Dressing is a good example. It doesn't matter if their outfit doesn't match. Choosing for themselves feels powerful. Think about other choices you are okay with your child making.

Avoid confusing language. If there isn't really a choice, don't ask a question. Don't ask "Ready for bed?" when "no" is not an ok answer. Instead, try: "It's bedtime. You can leave your puzzle right here and finish it in the morning."

Play games that help your child practice self-control. Play Red Light/Green Light or Simon Says. Take turns stirring the oatmeal for breakfast. These kinds of activities help children practice waiting and turn-taking.



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Be a role model for the skills you want your child to use. We all lose our tempers. When you do, find a moment to reconnect: “I’m sorry I yelled. I was feeling really frustrated. Next time, I’ll take a deep breath and try to stay calm.”

Set limits that are clear and good for your child’s age. Imagine your child threw a hard ball across your living room. Here’s what you might try:

If needed, stop the behavior right away: Get down on your child’s eye level. Hold the ball in your hands. Tell them, “No throwing balls in the living room. That’s a safety rule.” Use a serious but calm voice.

Name your child’s feelings: Naming feelings tells children we understand where they are coming from: “I know you love playing basketball. But that is a game for outside.”

Help your child understand what they *can* do: “You can throw soft balls in the house.”

Offer a better choice: “Would you like to use a foam ball or would you like to play with your cars?”

If needed, step in to help: “You are having trouble listening right now. I’m going to put the basketball away until we go to the park this afternoon. I’m here if you want to play together.”

You will see big leaps in your child’s development over the next few years. It will take time for them to learn to control their impulses. You can help them by listening to their big feelings and setting clear rules. When you are calm and consistent, you are their first — and best — teacher!

Have more questions?

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

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