

Compassionate Boundary Setting

Section 6



INTRODUCTION

“Without boundaries, you will act, sleep, work, groan, feel used and fulfill basic responsibilities rather than make choices to live and love fully, to work hard and nobly, to fulfill your purpose and to contribute passionately to your world.” – *(Black, J. and Enns, G, Better Boundaries: Owning and Treasuring Your Life. Oakland, CA. Raincoat Books)*



INFORMATION

Boundaries support our wellbeing and the wellbeing of those we care about. Effectively managing boundaries might mean remaining mindful of our goals and values in the midst of emotionally charged encounters, treating children with respect at all times rather than assuming a tone of excessive intimacy or authority, defining what is OK and not OK in how others treat us, holding to agreed upon boundaries even when you want to give in, or walking away from a situation when you think your involvement might undermine someone else’s boundaries.

Boundaries are particularly important in relationships with people who are survivors of trauma, many of whom have histories of being taken advantage of that have left them without the means to establish or maintain boundaries. Setting clear boundaries can protect our relationships with our youth and also allow us to maintain a level of self-awareness and self-regulation, protecting us from compassion fatigue.

When we are clear about what our boundaries are, we can communicate them ahead of time calmly rather than in a situation when they have already been crossed and emotions are stronger. In communicating our boundaries, it helps to be open to discussion and invite the other person to help problem solve how best to respect your boundaries. Discussing boundaries with our family members can help clarify how to support consistent boundaries and consider any exceptions to them.

Just as with most things in life, some of our boundaries will shift overtime. Circumstances will vary, information about our children (perhaps in relation to their mental health, learning abilities and strengths) will change and our own priorities may shift. During this time of flexibility, practicing self-compassion can help us stay grounded in the fact that we are doing the best we can with the resources we have available.

Brené Brown offers great insight into boundary setting and the link to empathy and compassion in this [6 minute video](#).

Developed in partnership with:



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To help identify needed boundaries, consider at least three ways that you would complete each of these three statements:

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| 1. I have the right to ask for (examples: privacy, information before making a decision, etc.) |
| 2. To protect my time and energy, it is OK to (examples: change my mind, set a time limit, etc.) |
| 3. People may not (examples: humiliate me in front of others, go through my desk/wallet/purse, etc.) |

Behavior and Beliefs in Relationships that Might be Signs of Ignored/Unstated Boundaries:

Too close – total dependence, “I need your approval and support 100% of the time.”

Avoid conflict – “If I ignore it, it will go away eventually.”

Victimhood – Identify self as the victim, “I have no power.”

Distant – Due to past experiences with people not respecting boundaries, one is fiercely independent, “I dare you to come close!” or shies away from openness with others.

Invisibility – Not wanting to be seen or heard so that boundaries are not violated

Three Types of Boundaries:

Permeable/with holes – A boundary is set but there is very little reinforcement of the boundary. For most of us, having overly permeable boundaries will allow unwanted behaviors from others and may mean that we are letting too much of ourselves out, limiting our privacy and self-care.

Rigid – These are the boundaries that you reinforce at all costs. Too rigid boundaries do not allow us to be open to new ideas or perspectives and can often keep us in the dark and unapproachable.

Flexible – Flexible boundaries are firm and clear yet open to new ideas and resources when needed. They are also sufficiently closed to protect us from harm.

But What about Compassion?

Our maintenance of boundaries does not override our ability to be caring. We continue to make ourselves open to and respectful of children, entering into their worlds and imagining what they have been through. We, in other words, employ both empathy and boundaries when relating to others. For example, if out of rage your child says something disrespectful to you, you can say, “I’m sorry that you’re in so much distress. Even so, it’s not okay for you to be so disrespectful to me, because it hurts my feelings and I wouldn’t let someone else speak to you that way. When you’re able to share your feelings with me more respectfully, I will be ready to help you.”

Boundaries Between Interactions

Between challenging interactions with our children, it is very helpful to do something to release tension and re-set for the next interaction. Examples include taking some slow breaths, visualizing a scene that is calming to you, stretching, humming, moving out of the environment for a moment, saying affirmations to ourselves, or talking with a friend.

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SELF-CARE



STRATEGIES

Reflect on this passage by Michelle Olak as you consider how and why to set compassionate boundaries.

And then I learned the spiritual journey
had nothing to do with being nice.
It had to do with being real and authentic.
Having boundaries.
Honoring and respecting my space first,
others second.
And in this space of self-care,
being nice just happened, it flowed...
not motivated by fear, but by LOVE.

By Michelle Olak



WHAT'S NEXT

Influencing our Family Culture – how does compassionate boundary setting inform our family culture?