

### Comments by Clinical Editor

In this article, Dr. Scuka clearly articulates the limit-setting principles that can provide structure in Play Therapy, Filial Therapy, and parenting in a manner that is non-judgmental, non-confrontational, and compassionate.

# The Rationale and Principles of Effective Limit Setting

## in Child-Centered Play Therapy, Filial Therapy and Parenting Education

Child-Centered Play Therapy (CCPT) recommends a three-step process for setting effective limits with children during the course of play sessions (Guerney, 1983a: 39). The purpose of this limit setting process is to help children learn how to effectively manage their behavior in pro-social directions.

The same three-step process for setting limits is taught to parents in the context of Filial Therapy, the latter representing a method for teaching parents how to conduct therapeutically oriented play sessions with their children for the purpose of strengthening the parent-child relationship while also helping the child resolve emotional issues and manage behavior more effectively (Guerney, 1983b; Van Fleet, 2005). The same three-step process for setting limits is also effectively taught to parents in the context of Louise Guerney's parenting education program (Guerney, 1995), though she also recommends that parents attempt to use structuring, parent messages and positive reinforcement before turning to limit setting.

The focus in this article, however, will be on the recommended process for setting limits within the context of CCPT, Filial Therapy and parenting education. First, we will briefly review the recommended three-step process for setting limits with a common situation faced by parents. Second, we will outline the rationale for how and why this three-step process for setting limits is constructed the way it is. Finally, we will describe nine principles of effective limit setting. The goal is to provide therapists and parent educators with a comprehensive set of teaching points that can be used to explain to parents not just the sequence of this three-step limit setting process, but also its rationale and underlying principles.

We will take as our example for applying this three-step process for setting limits a not uncommon situation that

parents encounter at home, namely, one sibling hitting another. When Matthew hits his sister Sarah, the parent might first try structuring – “Matthew, go play by yourself” – or a parent message – “Matthew, it upsets me when you fight with Sarah.” If neither tactic works, and the parent decides to employ limit setting, the first step would be for the parent simply to state the limit, without adding any reference to a consequence. For example, the parent might say: “Matthew,

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stop hitting Sarah. You are not permitted to do that.” Only if Matthew persists in hitting his sister would the parent go to the second step by way of restating the limit and now adding a future consequence that would apply if Matthew were to hit his sister yet a third time. For example, the parent could say: “Matthew, you know you are not permitted to hit Sarah. If you do that again, you will not be permitted to watch TV or play video games the rest of the day.” If Matthew still persists in this proscribed behavior, then the parent goes to the third step where the parent both enforces the stated limit by imposing the previously stated consequence and, equally importantly, explicitly states the connection between the consequence that is being imposed and the child’s behavior. For example, the parent could say: “Matthew, since you have chosen to hit Sarah again, you will not be permitted to watch TV or play video games for the rest of the day.” The operative phrase, of course, is “since you have chosen...”

Let’s now look at the rationale for this carefully constructed three-step process for setting limits, and then examine the principles involved in effective limit setting. The rationale for the first step of limit setting not going beyond simply stating the limit, without adding any reference to a consequence, is that (a) we wish to give the child an opportunity to comply voluntarily with the stated limit and (b) we wish to avoid unnecessarily upping the ante emotionally by adding a consequence the first time the child engages in the unwanted behavior. If we were to add a consequence to the first statement of a limit – “And if you do, you won’t be able to watch TV or play video games the rest of the day” – we would (a) be giving a negative message that we do not trust the child to be able to comply voluntarily with the stated limit and (b) run the risk of engendering oppositionality by virtue of leaving the child feeling implicitly invited (or provoked) to challenge the limit that is being set. Instead, we want to give the child a message of trust that we believe that s/he is able to comply voluntarily with the stated limit. If indeed the child does so, then both parent and child “win” because the child would have effectively managed his or her behavior and the parent would have secured what he or she wanted, namely, the cessation of the unwanted behavior. In other words, the process would have worked as designed. It would also be good, under this circumstance, for the parent to provide positive verbal reinforcement to the child for voluntarily complying with the stated limit.

If the child fails to comply with the stated limit, then the second step comes into play. Now the limit is restated and a future consequence that would be imposed if the child persists in the unwanted behavior is announced. The rationale here is that the child is being given a second chance to demonstrate his or her ability to comply voluntarily with the parental limit. Hence, the announced consequence would come into play only if the child fails to comply a second time. In effect, the child is being given an incentive to not break the limit by virtue of being able to retain the privilege that otherwise would be taken away.

Once again, if the child complies with the limit, then the process will have worked as designed because the child would have successfully managed his or her behavior and the parent would have obtained the desired result. Again, positive verbal reinforcement would be a good parental response to the child’s now complying with the stated limit.

If the child persists in not complying with the limit, the parent then moves to the third step. Now the parent imposes the previously announced consequence because the child has failed to comply with the limit. The rationale here is that the consequence must be imposed if the child fails to manage his or her behavior successfully in the prescribed manner. In addition, however, the further rationale is that the third step is not simply about imposing the consequence; instead, it is also about using the child’s failure to self-regulate behavior as a teachable moment whereby the parent makes explicit to the child the connection between the imposition of the consequence and the child’s failure to adhere to the limit set by the parent. Hence, the key phrase in imposing a consequence is “Since you have chosen (or decided) ...” – the goal being to foster in the child a sense of responsibility for managing his or her behavior. Moreover, in terms of process, we are not especially concerned as to whether the child follows the limit or not, because either way the process works. In other words, either the child learns to manage behavior successfully, or the child learns that the failure to do so results in the imposition of an unwanted consequence. Either way, the child learns something valuable; the process works.

If that represents the rationale for this recommended three-step process for setting limits, let’s now examine nine principles of effective limit setting.



**1. State the limit clearly and in concrete terms.** Statements such as “Matthew, stop doing that” or “Matthew, don’t be so annoying” are vague and imprecise because they lack specificity and concreteness regarding the behavior that the parent finds objectionable. This leaves the child unclear as to what the parent’s underlying expectation is. Therefore, limits ideally are stated clearly and in concrete behavioral terms, as in: “Matthew, stop hitting Sarah. You are not permitted to do that.”

**2. Make the first statement of a limit without adding any reference to a consequence.** This avoids upping the ante unnecessarily and gives the child a chance to comply voluntarily with the limit. A positive message of trust and confidence is more effective at engendering cooperation than a negative message that conveys lack of trust. Conveying trust and confidence to the child also reaps its own reward of positive regard on the part of the child toward the parent.

**3. Choose as a consequence something that has a chance of successfully deterring the child’s behavior because the child would experience it as aversive.** When possible, Guerney recommends relying first on a natural consequence, i.e., something that follows directly from the child’s behavior, and typically has already happened (1995: 94 and 102). However, when faced with the need to announce a future consequence because of continued limit breaking by the child, the parent has two options. The first (and generally preferred option) is to choose what Guerney refers to as a logical consequence, i.e., something that is directly related to the child’s behavior (1995: 95). In our example of Matthew hitting Sarah, this might involve the parent choosing as a consequence something that Matthew would not want to do, such as having to

clean up Sarah’s room. Alternatively, the parent could choose what Guerney refers to as an unrelated consequence. This typically would involve choosing something that is important to the child that the child would not want to lose. In our example above, the chosen consequence was the loss of TV and video games. The general point is that if the chosen consequence is not experienced by the child as aversive – i.e., does not involve something the child would not want to do or something the child would not want to lose – then the parent has no genuine leverage over the child’s choices and behavior. This means that the chosen consequence may differ from child to child. It also means that chosen consequences may change over time depending on a given child’s evolving interests and priorities.

**4. Avoid choosing a consequence that the child would perceive as unfair.** This is the flip side of the previous principle. Children have an in-built sense of fairness and become upset if they feel they are being treated unfairly. While children will not like receiving a consequence, in their own way they know it is deserved if they have persisted in being disobedient. However, children are very sensitive to feeling unfairly treated, so a parent wants to be cautious to not overdo the consequence by, for example, depriving the child of going to a friend’s birthday party for a relatively minor offense. Metaphorically put, “make the punishment fit the crime.” Also, employing a logical consequence that relates directly to the unwanted behavior can be effective.

**5. Impose the consequence for a limited period of time.** A related principle is in most cases to limit the duration of the consequence to a single day – or even a shorter period of time for a younger child. Part of this has to do with perceived

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fairness, but it also has to do with maintaining the effectiveness of the use of consequences. One of the common errors parents commit is to think that the longer the consequence lasts the more effective it is. Actually, the opposite is true. Indeed, the real problem emerges when the parent imposes, let's say, a consequence lasting a week or, even worse, a month, and then the child breaks another limit, and another. The risk is that the length of time the child loses a privilege extends so far out into the future that the child begins to think "Who cares! So what if I lose TV (or get grounded) for another week (or month). I may as well just do what I want, and mom (or dad) won't be able to do anything about it." In other words, from the child's perspective there really is nothing left to lose, and the parent runs the risk of effectively losing all control over the child's behavior. By imposing the consequence of, let's say, losing TV and video games for only one day, the parent actually maintains leverage over the child's behavior by virtue of the child being able to regain the privilege, which in turn motivates the child to work to not lose the privilege again.

**6. Always follow through on your announced consequence if a child fails to comply after the second statement of the limit.** The principle here is that if a parent announces a consequence, the parent must follow through on the imposition of the consequence if the child fails to comply with the limit. The failure to do so has the effect of the parent undermining his or her authority with the child. The reason is that the message the child takes away from the parent's failure to impose the consequence is that the parent isn't really serious; therefore, the child concludes, "I don't really have to listen to what mom (or dad) says because they're not really going to do anything."

The net effect is that the parent subverts his or her authority with the child, and the child is indirectly encouraged to act out in undesirable ways because the child has no fear of being held accountable for his or her choices and behavior. Therefore, a corollary principle is:

**7. Only pick a consequence you are willing to impose.**

The biggest reason why parents fail to follow through on an announced consequence is that they have no intention of imposing – or in good conscience come to realize that they can't impose – the previously announced consequence. Therefore, in order to avoid the catch-22 of announcing a consequence and then not imposing it, it is crucial that parents think carefully in advance what consequences they are willing to impose, and what consequences the child is likely not to perceive as unfair.

**8. Be consistent.** This principle is a corollary to the two previous principles. A parent's consistent application of the three-step process for setting limits, coupled with adherence to the principles articulated here, is crucial to the longer term effectiveness of the method. The reason is that part of the learning that the child derives from the parent following this process consistently is that whenever the child persists in breaking a limit that has been announced by the parent and given a second warning with the announcement of a future consequence, the child will indeed receive the consequence that has been announced. Over time, this will tend to induce the child to comply with parental limits because otherwise the child will on a regular basis have to do something that the child does not want to do or suffer the loss of privileges that the child does not wish to lose. Thus, the parent's consistent application of the recommended limit setting process is the key to its longer term success.

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**9. Use empathy in the context of setting limits.** Up to now we have focused on the sequence of the three-step process for setting limits, its rationale and the principles that make for effective limit setting. This final principle introduces a complimentary perspective, namely, that the effectiveness of setting limits is further increased when the parent (or therapist) also uses empathy to acknowledge the child's underlying emotion that is the backdrop of the child's undesirable behavior. So, for example, the effectiveness of the first statement of the limit would be increased if the parent were to say "Matthew, stop hitting Sarah. I know you are upset with her, but you are not permitted to hit your sister." By adding the empathic acknowledgment of the child's emotion in the context of setting the limit, the parent would be helping the child feel understood in terms of his experience. This in turn makes it easier for the child to accept the limit because the child feels that the parent at least understands what the child is experiencing; this increases the likelihood that the child will be able to comply with the limit. Likewise, with the second statement of the limit, the parent could add empathy by saying "Matthew, I know you are upset with Sarah. But you know you are not permitted to hit your sister. If you do that again, you will not be permitted to watch TV or play video games the rest of the day." The parent's addition of empathy again likely increases the odds that the child will voluntarily comply with the limit.

A final clarification in response to a common parental question. Parents often ask: "What if Matthew hits his sister again the next day. Do we go back and begin at step one?" The answer, in general terms, is "No." Once a child is presumed to know and understand a limit but breaks it on subsequent occasions, the parent may immediately go to step two and

restate the limit with the announcement of a future consequence if the child were to break the limit again. The caveat, however, is that if it is a younger child, or a child with processing limitations, the parent may well be advised to return to step one. The goal of this recommended process, after all, is to avoid an unnecessarily punitive stance with the child and instead foster gradual improvement in the child's behavioral self-management in a supportive and non-critical manner.

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