



Understanding, Setting and Holding Boundaries (NOT RULES)

Working with children with a trauma history, I prefer to use the word and framework of BOUNDARIES over RULES. I have found that “rules” can immediately trigger the threat response and cause a child with a highly sensitized threat response to become activated. Children often feel as though adults have the intention of taking their power away as opposed to keeping them safe when we use language around “enforcing rules” vs. the more soothing framing of “upholding boundaries”. When the threat response becomes activated, adults are met with instant and often fierce resistance. I’ve found, over the years, the word and concept of “boundary” to be more tolerable to the sensitized nervous system. I also like the word because children can understand that adults have boundaries too. For some reason kids often believe that adults do not have to follow rules. I do a lot of work on the front end explaining that boundaries (like rules) are something that are all around us, all the time. They exist for our physical, emotional, social and community safety and well-being. They are not good or bad, they just are.

BOUNDARIES DEFINED:

In her book, *Daring Greatly*, professor and researcher Brené Brown defines boundaries, very simply, as “what’s okay and what’s not okay”.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BOUNDARIES:

Brown’s research reveals the importance of boundaries, citing the surprising idea that the most compassionate, wholehearted people are also the most boundaried people. What often happens, Brown says, is that dismissing behaviors that are not okay leaves us resentful and hateful. Instead, she continues, we are able to stay kinder, more loving, generous and compassionate when we are straightforward with what is okay and what’s not okay.

For example:

1, In a game of Nerf War, your child opponent may be playing too rough and aim for your face too many times and it really hurts you several times. You keep playing anyway, even though you’re getting hurt even though it’s not so for you... to a point. Finally, you’ve had all you can take, you are angry. You cease the toy weapons and say “That’s it! You’re being mean and hurting me on purpose. You’re done with Nerf War until you prove you can play kindly”.

Or

Example 2, Before the game starts you lay the ground rules. “It’s okay to play for 30 minutes, so long as it feels safe, fun and fair for everyone playing. It’s not okay to aim for faces and other sensitive body parts, or shoot at close range”. And then if the boundary is broken you kindly say, “We have to end now because it was getting unsafe. That was fun, and great practice, I look forward to trying again soon. I’ll bet next time we will be able to play safer for longer. How about we build that cool new Lego set with the rest of our time together?”

Brown’s research reveals that judgement seeps in when our boundaries become weak. When we hold boundaries, when we stay in a place of assuming that people are doing the best that they can. Boundaries afford us the generosity to assume the best about people. She goes on to say, healthy relationships are not sustainable without boundaries.

UNDERSTANDING what this means for caring for and working with children and youth with trauma related needs is essential. I’ve adapted a boundary exercise from Brené Brown *Courage Works* curriculum for use with children with a sensitized nervous system. Keeping in mind the goal of soothing the nervous system and supporting children in managing predictive threat responses means steering away

from a punitive, or behavioral approach to discipline. That is not to be confused with or mistaken to mean not having boundaries. Boundaries are essential, as Brené Brown's work so clearly communicates. The important piece for children with high trauma needs (or adults for that matter) is to realize that boundaries do not need to be punitive or involve imposed consequences. Boundaries are about emotional and physical safety and communicating them as such is an important part of setting and holding boundaries, especially with people who have experienced trauma.

UNDERSTANDING EMPATHY is an important part of setting and holding boundaries too. Brené Brown **DEFINES EMPATHY** as "feeling with someone," not "feeling for them" It's letting someone know they are not alone, you are with them, it's the shared human experience. Empathy minus boundaries is not empathy.

Boundaries are very important - they are not division, they are connection keeping, they are practiced respect.

Brown gives the acronym "**B.I.G.**" to help stay within the framework for setting and holding healthy boundaries:

B.I.G. - BOUNDARIES need to be in place, so I can maintain my **INTEGRITY** and keep making **GENEROUS** assumptions about you.

SETTING A BOUNDARY and HOLDING A BOUNDARY

When working with families and providers, my recommendation is to use the following worksheet, and to fill it out using language that frames boundaries that always convey care and safety



Boundaries

What is Okay

What is NOT Okay

**This is what happens when
you do what is okay:**

**This is what happens when
you do what is NOT okay:**
