Boundary Issues in Foster and Adopted Children

What are boundaries?

A personal boundary is an invisible line that we use to mark where our physical and emotional beings begin and end. Boundaries allow us to protect ourselves from things that cause us stress, harm, or make us uncomfortable. They also prevent us from being hurt by others. We have
internal boundaries that allow us to examine ourselves in relationship to others, and
external boundaries that separate our physical selves.

Children in foster care often have had their boundaries violated in some way, through abuse, neglect, or psychological trauma. As a result, they may exhibit behaviors that indicate they have not learned appropriate boundaries. They may not feel safe within their own bodies, and may have trouble making and maintaining social relationships. Due to their lack of knowledge about boundaries, you may find your child's behaviors to be incredibly aggravating. As their parent, it is up to you to teach them the rules of the home and how to establish appropriate boundaries.

Recognizing boundary issues

Children have issues with boundaries due to abuse and neglect. They are either very distant due to attachment issues, or entangled due to the need to be the "parent". Typically two of the biggest indicators that your child may have boundary issues are feeling like they are smothering you, or that they are not even aware of your presence. Other indicators that your child may have boundary issues include:

- Not knowing how to respect other people's possessions
- Wanting to always kiss/hug/touch other children or adults
- Constantly needing attention and praise
- Seeking your attention through misbehaviors
- Consistently using other people's things without permission
- A lack of urgency to self-protect, and engaging in behaviors such as wandering off, talking to strangers, etc.
- Talking about their abuse with strangers
- Asking very personal questions and/or asking personal questions in public

Setting boundaries

One of the best ways to establish boundaries is through house rules. Having a list of rules that every family member follows allows your child to know what is expected of them. Some ideas for house rules include:

- No swearing/using vulgar language

- Not hitting, kicking, or hurting others
- No harming or destroying personal property or other's property
- Ask for permission before touching or using other's property
- Use your words to express anger
- Ask for permission before leaving the house
- Homework and chores must be done before TV time/play time
- Always wear clothes, pajamas, or a robe in the house

These are just a few suggestions for the types of rules you may want to establish in your home. Once you have created the list, take some time to review it with your child. Post the rules in different places around your house so the child can see them and refer to them whenever necessary. For older children and teens, have them sign a copy of the rules after you review them and give them a copy. For younger children, remind them of the rules often, especially when going into public places or new situations.

Finally, you will also want to establish a consequence when a rule is broken. For example, if a child watches TV before their homework or chores are done, they lose TV privileges the next night. Boundaries are only considered to be boundaries when they push back a bit after contact.

Helping children learn boundaries

The following are ways you can help teach your children boundaries:

Modeling respect for boundaries - Teach your children boundaries by modeling. How you treat others in your home is one way you model boundaries. Remember that your child may have come from a home where respect was not modeled to them, so they may not know how to act appropriately. How you model your behaviors sets the standard for how you expect them to behave. Examples include knocking on a closed door before entering a room; resolving conflicts in a positive way; and dealing with anger in positive ways.

Teaching boundaries about touch - Some children may have issues with what is appropriate contact. You may have to teach your child what is appropriate contact and what is not. If your child was sexually abused, they will need to learn to become safe within their own body. Ask permission before touching your child. For example, if your child has accomplished good grades in school and you want to give them a hug, make sure to ask first. If they seem hesitant or reluctant, tell them that you recognize that they don't want to be hugged right now, and that it's ok. This models respect to your child, and allows them to feel comfortable setting their own personal boundaries.

Teaching social skills - Just because a child is a certain chronological age, does not mean that he/she has the social skills to match their age. In these cases, you will have to teach your child social skills. Practice social skills with your child, using a made-up situation or a real one. Give your child feedback at the end, and praise him/her when he/she exhibits the new skill in a real-life situation. Keep in mind that your child will not learn these skills overnight, and it may take some time for them to stick.

The following are some common social skills a child may have to learn and how to practice them with your child:

Remaining Calm

Teach your child to take a deep breath, relax their muscles and count to ten when they are loosing their cool. Have them share their feelings with the other person and tell them why they are upset. Have them work with the other person to come up with a solution to the problem.

Accepting Criticism
Teach your child to look the person in the eye, remain quiet while the other person is talking, show them that you understand what they are saying, and finally try and correct the problem.

Disagreeing with Others
Teach your child to remain calm and look at the other person. Have them start off with a positive or a neutral statement, rather than an aggressive or negative one. Have your child explain why they disagree, and have them practice listening while the other person explains their side. Work with your child on coming to a solution, and have your child say "thank you for listening" to the other person, regardless of the outcome.

Accepting "No"
Teach your child to calmly ask for a reason if they do not understand. Have them look at the other person and say "Ok". If they still disagree, teach them how to bring it up later.

Resources

You may find the following resources helpful:

Fostering Skills: Boundaries in Foster Care

Understanding the Need for Boundaries in Foster Care

The Adoptive and Foster Parent Guide: How to Heal Your Child's Trauma and Loss by Carol Lozier, LCSW

Attachment, Trauma, and Healing: Understanding and Treating Attachment Disorder in Families by Terry M. Levy and Michael Orlans

The Foster Parenting Toolbox by Kim Phagan-Hansel

Source

Alaska Center for Resource Families, for the State of Alaska DHSS, OCS

Upcoming Child Matching Events

Thursday, December 5th at 12PM PST. See the children that will be featured in the event here. Please register here.

**If you don't see any children listed on the event page, please continue to check back for updates.

If you have any questions about our Matching Events, please contact our Recruitment Coordinator at lisa.kisner@afamilyforeverychild.org or recruitment@afamilyforeverychild.org