

# 'Setting Limits'

## The Nonviolent Way

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The philosophy of nonviolent parenting (NVP) says that limits should be age appropriate. What are reasonable expectations for our children based on their age?

When my son Connor was about eight months old, a friend asked me to stay with her two boys, ages 2 and 3, while they were out of town for a week. I was completely out of my depth.

When I asked the boys not to do something, why did they turn around and do it again 15 minutes later? Were they capable of remembering? I didn't know and it proved to be a very frustrating week.

It seems pretty obvious that the more we know about our child's development, the better we'll be at setting limits our children can meet with some success. What's not so obvious is the idea that the behavior we want to limit is actually our child's best effort to get some need met.

An important premise of the non-dominant paradigm is that all human behavior is an attempt or strategy to get a need met, and all behavior is done for the best of intentions. All the while I'm setting a limit; for instance, I'll say, "*I need you to hold my hand in the parking lot.*" I'm asking questions and looking for what the need might be: "*I'm wondering if you are needing to be independent and do this yourself. I'm wondering if you are having a hard time waiting. I'm wondering...*"

I continue to set the limit and inquire about what might be going on with my child. I'm also observing, looking for and asking questions about what he might be feeling.

This can be perceived as "coddling" if you don't understand how the brain develops and functions. There are three principal areas of the brain: the lower area, which controls our autonomic nervous systems and flight/fight response; the middle, which is considered the "emotional" part of the brain and controls the release of hormones in response to stress; and the upper, neo-cortex or rational thinking reasoning part of the brain.



Scientists once believed that the ability to reason was formed around the age of 7. We now know that the upper part of our brain is not fully formed until around the age 26! So our preschool kids do not have a solid connection to the part of the brain that reasons.

When a human experiences an unmet or thwarted need, the mid-brain can become flooded with emotion. This activates the lower brain, putting us in "flight or fight" mode; the hormone cortisol is released to help the body maintain enough equilibrium to either fight or flee. In a fully integrated adult brain capable of cognitive thinking, the neo-cortex then takes over, regulating the emotions and allowing us to problem-solve to get our needs met.

When a child's brain becomes flooded with emotion, what little connection there is to the neo-cortex is completely disrupted. Until the child's brain becomes regulated again, he or she is not capable of reasoning, self-regulating or problem-solving. The result of this flooding of emotion is what the dominant paradigm often calls a "tantrum" or "disruptive behavior".

What helps a child's brain to become regulated is empathy. The definition of empathy is identification with the feelings, thoughts or attitudes of another person. Because in the non-dominant paradigm we try to refrain from judging and assuming (forms of "power over"), I provide empathy by speculating: "*I wonder if you are feeling...I'm guessing you are feeling...*"

*continued on back...*

### **CNVEP Saturday Parenting Classes:**

9:00 am – 10:45 am Spanish Class

9:00 am – 10:45 am Fathers' Group

11:00 am – 12:45 pm English Class

## Setting Limits...

While I'm setting a limit, I'm also giving empathy: *"No it's not OK to hit Mama. I'm going to hold you while we sit and breathe. I'm guessing you're feeling pretty angry. I know. It's hard to leave when you're having so much fun. But I'm not going to let you hit me. That's not OK."* Or: *"I hear you growling, so I'm guessing you are really angry right now. Is that what you are feeling? Let's hit the sand. Or we can stomp our feet to express our anger..."*

Oh, this seems to take so much time. Why not give the kid a time-out and have that be the end of it? Because when a child is flooded with emotion and cortisol is released, anything that causes more emotional stress (the parent's anger, withdrawal of attention/affection or physical punishment) causes more cortisol to be released.

This overflow of cortisol over time can damage brain tissue. When a "flooded" child is given empathy, the flooding subsides.

And when we maintain our loving connection, the hormones oxytocin and serotonin are released. These "feel-good" hormones grow more neurons, causing more connection and integration in a child's developing brain. As our Director Ruth Beaglehole likes to say, "Love grows brains."

Ruth has developed an acronym - "**OF NEEDS**" - that describes the basic process of this practice of NVP. When you practice **OF NEEDS** you can effectively help your children self-regulate, and get their needs met using strategies that are safe and respectful of others.

**O = Observe** - Not only what is happening, but what may have led up to this moment.

**F = Feelings** - What might the child be feeling? Suspend judgment.

**N = Needs** - All feelings spring from needs.

**E = Engage** - How can I stay connected? Breathe? Self-empathy?

**E = Empathy** - Validate what the child might be feeling/needing: *"I wonder if you might be feeling...Is it because you are needing...Is that right?"*

**DS = Develop Solutions / Strategies** - Ask the child for suggestions, work to honor her or his feelings/needs, use creativity/playfulness, use other outlets (breathing, drawing, stomping) to express feelings.

To sum up, here is a quote from the Center for Nonviolent Education and Parenting:

***"Limits are chosen to keep children safe, to teach family values and socialization skills. Parents scaffold children with support and engage in a process of dialogue to explain the limits. Parents stay connected with children as they challenge limits. Parents take responsibility for developing tolerance for children's protests and strong feelings. The goal is to foster the child's ability to internalize ways of being in the world that are respectful and empathetic towards themselves and others."***

The bottom line for me is that it is more important how I set a limit, than the actual limit itself. My child's brain, and therefore his or her future depend on it. I'd be overwhelmed by that responsibility if I weren't so jazzed by the magic of our connection. This stuff Works - with a capital "W"!

The **Parent Educator Certification Program** (PECP) is a seven month intensive training program in the nonviolent philosophy and practice for individuals who wish to become certified teachers of a basic course in nonviolent parenting and education.

The next course will begin in October 2008.

For more information go to [www.cnvep.org](http://www.cnvep.org) and click on Professional Services or contact Ruth Beaglehole at [ruth@cnvep.org](mailto:ruth@cnvep.org), ext. 301 or Susan Goldberg at [susan@cnvep.org](mailto:susan@cnvep.org), 213.484.6676.

RAISING CHILDREN WITH CARE



RAISING CHILDREN TO CARE

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