



HOW HEALTHY
CHOICES
GROW HEALTHY
CHILDREN

BOUNDARIES WITH KIDS

DR. HENRY CLOUD & DR. JOHN TOWNSEND

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Boundaries with Kids

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Why Boundaries with Kids

“What is this new book you and Henry are writing?” asked my seven-year-old son, Ricky.

“It’s about boundaries and kids,” I (Dr. Townsend) replied.

Ricky thought a moment, then said reflectively, “I like to *say* boundaries, but I don’t like to *hear* them.”

Join the rest of the human race, Ricky. All of us like to set boundaries, but we don’t like to hear other people’s boundaries. We have empathy for whatever led you, the reader, to pick up this book, because Ricky’s statement describes the position of all children (and many adults): What gratifies me is “good” and what frustrates me is “bad.” Ever since the time of Adam and Eve, taking ownership of our lives and accepting responsibility for ourselves is something we have resisted. Your task as a parent is to help your child develop inside him what you have been providing on the outside: responsibility, self-control, and freedom. Setting and maintaining boundaries is not an easy task, but with the right ingredients, it really works.

Why Boundaries with Kids?

Several years ago, we coauthored *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, When to Say No to Take Control of Your Life* (Zondervan, 1992). This book sets forth the concept that setting limits helps us better own our lives and, ultimately, helps us love God and others better. The book’s ongoing popularity speaks to the need of so many people who struggle with problems such as irresponsible, manipulative, or controlling relationships, emotional issues, work conflicts, and the like.

Since *Boundaries* was published, many parents have asked us questions— in the counseling office, in seminars, and on the radio— about how boundaries work in child rearing. Parents are concerned with raising kids who are not only loving, but also responsible. And they want something that will do more than help people heal broken boundaries. They want something to prevent boundary problems, to help build boundaries in children. This book is for them. It applies the principles in *Boundaries* to the specific context of child rearing.

Who Should Read This Book?

Boundaries with Kids was written for parents of children of all ages, from infancy to the teen years. However, if you aren't a parent, *Boundaries with Kids* may also help you to help the children you love and whose lives you impact. This book will help you if you are a

- Teacher
- Grandparent
- Coach
- Neighbor
- Day-care worker or baby-sitter
- Church youth worker
- Or even a teen who is working on your own boundaries!

Although you may not be a parent, you still want to be a force for responsibility and righteousness in the lives of the kids you influence. This book is designed to help you implement these principles, whether you are a primary caretaker or play a secondary role in a child's life.

Why Should You Read This Book?

You don't have to be in a crisis to benefit from this book. The principles offered here apply to all situations. Your child may be at age-appropriate levels of maturity at home, at school, and in relationships. As a result, you may want to use this material to ensure that the process continues as your child navigates from one age group to another and into adulthood.

But *Boundaries with Kids* will also help with problems and crises in parenting. All parents have problems. Some problems are oriented around issues of responsibility and self-control. This book shows how to deal with these sorts of problems:

- Impulsivity
- Inattention to parental directives
- Defying authority
- Whining
- Procrastination
- Inability to finish tasks
- Aggressive behavior
- School problems
- Conflicts with friends
- Sexual involvement
- Drugs
- Gangs

While this book addresses these and many other problems, it is not “problem centered,” but rather “principle centered.” By “principle centered” we mean that the book is organized around key concepts that will help children take ownership of their lives. We have taken these concepts from our study of the Bible and God’s teaching on responsibility, stewardship, and self-control. In *Boundaries*, the chapter on the Ten Laws of Boundaries was designed to help readers take charge of their lives. In the present book, each law has been expanded to an entire chapter and applied to child rearing.

Boundaries with Kids isn’t written chronologically, with separate sections on infancy, toddlerhood, childhood, and the teen years. We organized the book the way we did because we believe the principles of boundaries with children are universal, and they work with kids at all levels of development. You need to apply the laws to your child in age- and maturity-appropriate ways. So we have included in each chapter many examples and illustrations of how these laws are applied at all age levels, to give you a way to understand them in your own situation.

This book is geared much more toward how you, the parent, behave with your child than toward educating your child. Learning boundaries has a lot to do with going through experiences, such as receiving consequences for behavior, learning to take ownership, and dealing with the boundaries of others. It's a lot like how the Bible describes the growth process: "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11).

As you learn to require responsibility from your child, your child learns the value of being responsible. The process begins with you.

Outline of the Book

Boundaries with Kids is organized in three sections. Part 1, "Why Kids Need Boundaries," is an overview of the importance of helping children learn to take responsibility. It describes what a maturing child with boundaries looks like, as well as how a parent with her own boundaries behaves and relates. Part 2, "Ten Boundary Principles Kids Need to Know," deals with each of the ten laws of boundaries. Here you learn that it's not just *teaching* children boundaries, it's *being* a boundary, with consequences, that helps the child learn that his life is his own problem, not yours. Finally, Part 3, "Implementing Boundaries with Kids," concludes the book with six steps of how to implement boundary setting specifically and practically with your child.

Finally, if you are overwhelmed with the task of teaching a young person who sees responsibility as something to be avoided at all costs, be comforted. God is also a parent and for many years has gone through the same pains you are experiencing. He understands, and he will guide and help your willing heart: "The LORD watches over the way of the righteous" (Psalm 1:6). Ask him for his help, wisdom, and resources as you continue the process of helping young people grow up into maturity in him.

So welcome to *Boundaries with Kids*! Our prayer is that you will find help, information, and hope to help your children learn when to say yes and when to say no to take control of their lives.

Part 1

Why Kids Need Boundaries

The Future Is Now

*I*t was a normal day, but one that would forever change my friend's parenting.

We had finished dinner, and I (Dr. Cloud) was visiting with my friend, Allison, and her husband, Bruce, when she left the dinner table to do some chores. Bruce and I continued to talk until a phone call took him away as well, so I went to see if I could lend Allison a hand.

I could hear her in their fourteen-year-old son Cameron's room. I walked in to a scene that jolted me. She was cheerfully putting away clothes and sports equipment and making the bed. She struck up a conversation as if things were normal: "I can't wait for you to see the pictures from our trip. It was so much—"

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm cleaning up Cameron's room," she said. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

"You are what?"

"I told you. I'm cleaning up his room. Why are you looking at me like that?"

All I could do was to share with her the vision in my head. "I just feel sorry for Cameron's future wife."

Allison straightened up, froze for a moment, and then hurried from the room. I walked into the hall to see her standing there motionless. Not knowing what to say, I said nothing. After a few moments, she looked at me and said, "I've never thought about it that way."

Nor have most of us. We parent in the present without thinking about the future. We usually deal with the problems at hand. Making it through an afternoon without wanting to send our children to an eight-year camp in Alaska seems like a huge accomplishment! But one goal of parenting is to keep an eye on the future. We are raising our children to be responsible adults.

Parents interact with their children in a way that comes naturally to them. For example, Allison was by nature a “helper,” and she gladly helped her son. Others have different parenting styles. Some, who are more laid back and uninvolved, leave their son’s room alone. Those who are stricter inflict heavy punishment for a less than regulation-made bed.

Certainly, child rearing requires many different interventions. There are times for helping, for not getting involved, or for being strict. But the real issue is this: *Is what you are doing being done on purpose?* Or are you doing it from reasons that you do not think about, such as your own personality, childhood, need of the moment, or fears?

Remember, parenting has to do with more than the present. You are preparing your child for the future. *A person’s character is one’s destiny.*

A person’s character largely determines how he will function in life. Whether he does well in love and in work depends on the abilities he possesses inside. In a world that has begun to explain away people’s behavior with a variety of excuses, people are left wondering why their lives do not work. *Most of our problems result from our own character weakness.* Where we possess inner strength, we succeed, often in spite of tough circumstances. But where we do not possess inner strength, we either get stuck or fail. If a relationship requires understanding and forgiveness and we do not have that character ability, the relationship will not make it. If a difficult time period in work requires patience and delay of gratification and we do not possess those traits, we will fail. Character is almost everything.

The word *character* means different things to different people. Some people use *character* to mean moral functioning or integrity. We use the word to describe a person’s entire makeup,

who he is. Character refers to a person's ability and inability, his moral makeup, his functioning in relationships, and how he does tasks. What does he do in certain situations, and how does he do it? When he needs to perform, how will he meet those demands? Can he love? Can he be responsible? Can he have empathy for others? Can he develop his talents? Can he solve problems? Can he deal with failure? How does he reflect the image of God? These are a few of the issues that define character.

If a person's character makeup determines his future, then child rearing is primarily about helping children to develop character that will take them through life safely, securely, productively, and joyfully. Parents—and those who work with children—would do well to keep this in mind. A major goal of raising children is to help them develop the character that will make their future go well.

It wasn't until Allison saw this future reality that her parenting changed. She loved helping Cameron. But in many ways her helping was not "helping" Cameron. He had developed a pattern in which he felt entitled to everyone else's help, and this feeling of entitlement affected his relationships at school and at church. Allison had always been glad to help Cameron through the messes he was creating. Another undone project was another opportunity to love him.

Yet Allison was not only a mother, but also a grown woman and a wife. When she looked into the future and saw a time when Cameron would be leaving responsibilities for others to do, she became concerned. What a mother doesn't mind doing, others deplore. She glimpsed the reality of character destiny. And she changed how she interacted with Cameron to help him develop a sense of responsibility, to help him think about how his behavior affected others and whether or not others would want to be a part of his future.

It is in this sense that we say the future is now. When you are a parent, you help create a child's future. The patterns children establish early in life (their character) they will live out later. And character is always formed in relationship. We can't overestimate your role in developing this character. As Proverbs says,

“Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” (Proverbs 22:6).

Preventive Medicine

In 1992 we wrote *Boundaries*, a book about taking control of one’s life. In *Boundaries* we talked about how to repair the brokenness in character caused by a lack of boundaries. Since that time, through workshops and on radio and television, we have spoken to more than a million people about creating boundaries in their lives. Thousands have told us that creating boundaries has enabled them to love and to live better, some for the first time. Nothing is more exciting than to see people grow and change.

But from our own experience and that of our audiences and readers, one thing became obvious to us. Adults with boundary problems had not developed those problems as grown-ups. They had learned patterns early in life and then continued those out-of-control patterns in their adult lives, where the stakes were higher. They had learned the following boundary problems as youngsters:

- Inability to say no to hurtful people or set limits on hurtful behavior from others
- Inability to say no to their own destructive impulses
- Inability to hear no from others and respect their limits
- Inability to delay gratification and accomplish goals and tasks
- Tendency to be attracted to irresponsible or hurtful people and then try to “fix” them
- Taking responsibility for other people’s lives
- Ability to be easily manipulated or controlled
- Struggles with intimacy and maintaining closeness with others
- Inability to be honest with those they are close to
- Inability to confront others and resolve conflicts productively
- Experiencing life as a victim instead of living it purposefully with a feeling of self-control

- Addictions and compulsions
- Disorganization and lack of follow-through

So we began to think preventively. We love helping adults with boundary problems that have gone on for years, but we also want to help children avoid experiencing what many of us had to go through to repair boundary deficits. This realization led us to write this book on boundaries with kids. Most of the adults we encountered had had well-intentioned parents. But many times these parents had had no clue about how to build boundaries into their children; thus they passed on their own limited boundary functioning. Had many of these parents known how to raise a child with good boundaries, much pain could have been prevented. We hope this book will help you to develop the kind of character in your children that will prevent many problems with which adults struggle.

In addition, parents began to ask for this book. They knew the pain they had been through and did not want their children to go through the same kind of learning curve. It is better for a child to lose privileges than for an adult to lose a marriage or a career. In addition, they realized that boundaries are a key to making any relationship work, and they wanted to know how to live out the principles of boundaries with their children. Their questions can be grouped into three basic areas:

- How do I teach boundaries to children?
- How do I enforce my own boundaries with my children in appropriate ways?
- How can I ensure that my children will not have the problems with boundaries that I have had?

We want to help you answer those questions and to help your children develop the character that will lead them into the life that God created them to have.

Children Are Not Born with Boundaries

A boundary is a “property line” that defines a person; it defines where one person ends and someone else begins. If we know

where a person's boundaries are, we know what we can expect this person to take control of: himself or herself. We can require responsibility in regard to feelings, behaviors, and attitudes. We have all seen couples, for example, arguing with each other about "who's to blame," each avoiding responsibility for oneself. In a relationship with someone, we can define what we expect of each other, and then we can require each other to take responsibility for our respective part. When we each take ownership for our part of a relationship, the relationship works, and we all accomplish our goals.

A child is no different. A child needs to know where she begins, what she needs to take responsibility for, and what she does not need to take responsibility for. If she knows that the world requires her to take responsibility for her own personhood and life, then she can learn to live up to those requirements and get along well in life.

But if she grows up in a relationship where she is confused about her own boundaries (what she is responsible for) and about others' boundaries (what they are responsible for), she does not develop the self-control that will enable her to steer through life successfully. She will grow up with confused boundaries that lead to the opposite: *trying to control others and being out of control of herself*. In fact, an accurate description of children is that they are little people who are out of control of themselves and attempting to control everyone around them. They do not want to take control of themselves to adapt to the requirements of Mom and Dad; they want Mom and Dad to change the requirements!

You can see why parenting is so difficult. Children are not born with boundaries. They internalize boundaries from external relationships and discipline. In order for children to learn who they are and what they are responsible for, their parents have to have clear boundaries with them and relate to them in ways that help them learn their own boundaries.

If boundaries are clear, children develop several qualities:

- A well-defined sense of who they are
- What they are responsible for

- The ability to choose
- The understanding that if they choose well, things will go well, and if they choose poorly, they will suffer
- The possibility for true love based in freedom

The essence of boundaries is self-control, responsibility, freedom, and love. These are the bedrock of the spiritual life. Along with loving and obeying God, what could be a better outcome of parenting than that? But the question is, how does that happen?

The Three Roles of a Parent

Parenting can be looked at in many different ways. Some see a parent as a coach, some as a police officer, some as a friend, some as God. In part, all of these roles have some truth to them.

In our view, the parent or caretaker role consists of these three main functions:

- Guardian
- Manager
- Source

Guardian

A guardian is legally responsible for a child and, in that capacity, protects and preserves the child. Why does a parent need to provide protection and preservation?

The Bible says that children are “under guardians and managers” until the appropriate time (Galatians 4:2 NASB). Children do not possess the wisdom for protecting and preserving their own lives. They do not know right from wrong, dangerous from safe, good from better, life from death. They think not about the outcome of their actions, but about immediate gratification. Therefore, as they explore and discover their limits, they put themselves in danger. Wisdom comes only from experience—the big thing a child is short on.

A guardian provides the child with a safe environment for learning and gaining wisdom. Too little freedom to gain experience, and the child forever remains a child. Too much free-

dom, and the child is in danger of hurting himself. So balancing freedom and limits becomes a major task in child rearing. Parents must guard children from danger, protect them from harm, and preserve their lives.

This protective guardian steps in with appropriate boundaries and limits to guard children from several sources of danger:

1. Dangers within themselves
2. Dangers in the outside world
3. Inappropriate freedoms that they are not ready to handle
4. Never appropriate or evil actions, behaviors, or attitudes (such as serial killing or using LSD)
5. Their own regressive tendency to remain dependent and avoid growing up

Parents, in their role as guardian, keep the child safe, growing, and healthy. More often than not, they use boundaries to perform this function. They set limits to freedom, and then enforce them for the child's protection. Through this process, the child internalizes the limits as wisdom and slowly begins to be able to take care of herself.

Manager

A manager makes sure things get done—goals are reached, demands and expectations are met. Children are not born with self-discipline; therefore they have to have “other-discipline.” Managers provide this other-discipline by making sure the child does the tasks at hand to meet the expectations important for her growth.

Managers provide this discipline by controlling resources, teaching, enforcing consequences, correcting, chastising, maintaining order, and building skills. They oversee the day-to-day hard work of reaching goals.

When Allison decided that she was going to guard Cameron from his wish to avoid being responsible for himself, she had to manage that process. As you may suspect, Cameron did not immediately sign up for the new plan! Allison had to set some goals, control the resources, and manage the consequences until

her son developed the discipline that he would eventually need to get along well with someone other than Mom. In short, she had to manage his immaturity. For instance, she gave him time lines to learn to take care of his belongings and perform jobs around the house. She outlined what would happen if he did not, and she stuck to the consequences that she promised to impose. He lost many privileges and learned the cost of being a slacker.

Boundaries play an important role in managing. Setting limits and requiring the child to take ownership (embracing the problem as his own) and responsibility (taking care of what he has embraced) entail a clear understanding of boundaries. We will talk more about this later.

Source

Children come into the world without resources. They don't know where the food is, how to get shelter, or how to obtain the money they need for basic supplies. They have immaterial needs as well, without knowing how to meet them. They need love, spiritual growth, wisdom, support, and knowledge, all of which are out of their reach.

Parents are the source of all good things for a child. They are the bridge to the outside world of resources that sustain life. And in giving and receiving resources, boundaries play a very important role. Children need to learn how to receive and use responsibly what is given them and gradually take over the role of meeting their own needs. In the beginning, parents are the source; they progressively give the child the independence to obtain what they need on their own.

Being the source for children is fraught with blessing and difficulty. If parents give without boundaries, children learn to feel entitled and become self-centered and demanding. Ungratefulness becomes a character pattern. If parents hold resources too tightly, children give up and do not develop the hope of reaching goals that have gratifying rewards. We will see how boundaries help structure the resources and how they play an important role in parenting.

Learning to Take Responsibility

When Cameron was first enlisted in the process of learning how to take responsibility for cleaning up, he was lacking several things:

- He did not feel the need to clean up. Mom felt that need.
- He did not feel motivated to clean up. Mom felt motivated.
- He did not plan for or take the time to clean up. Mom did.
- He did not have the skill to organize. Mom did.

So how did he learn to take responsibility for himself? There was a slow transfer of these qualities from the outside of Cameron to the inside. Whereas Mom possessed all the qualities inside of her and Cameron did not, boundaries reversed all that. In the end, Mom did not feel the need or the motivation, and she did not take the time or use her skills. Instead, Cameron did. Boundaries facilitated the process of having the child internalize things that were external to him. And in the final analysis, building boundaries in a child accomplishes this: *What was once external becomes internal.*

In the rest of this book we will talk about the process by which kids internalize the structure they do not naturally possess. As you take a stance of good clear boundaries with children, they will have a better chance of gaining the motivation, the need, the skill, and the plan to live a loving, responsible, righteous, and successful life unto God and others. And this is what character is all about.

In the next chapter we will take a closer look at the kind of character we want to develop in our children.

Boundaries with Kids

How Healthy Choices Grow Healthy Children

By Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend

What the *New York Times* bestselling *Boundaries* has done for adult relationships, *Boundaries with Kids* will do for you and your children.

Here is the help you need for raising your kids to take responsibility for their actions, attitudes, and emotions. Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend take you through the ins and outs of instilling the kind of character in your children that will help them lead balanced, productive, and fulfilling adult lives.

Learn how to set limits and still be a loving parent; bring control to an out-of-control family life; apply the ten laws of boundaries to parenting; define appropriate boundaries and consequences for your kids; and much more!

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