Setting Healthy Boundaries in a Co-Parenting Relationship

Boundaries are essential in any relationship—between parents and children, friends, employers and employees, and certainly between foster and birth families. Simply stated, a boundary is anything that separates two things. For communication and relationships, setting healthy boundaries means talking about what is and isn't okay.

As a foster parent, relative caregiver, or birth parent, it may feel awkward to bring up the subject of boundaries. As uncomfortable as it may be to give a parent parameters for contact with their child, imagine how that must feel for the birth parent. To support healthy relationships for everyone involved, it is essential to have boundary discussions early and often as situations change.

Why are Boundaries Necessary?

Establishing boundaries for all adults involved in a child's life will encourage respectful relationships. Foster parents Dave and Jessie describe what a positive co-parenting relationship looks like in our No Matter What Families video, [Fostering the Family](#). Dave shares that they got involved in foster care to help kids in need, but then realized they could be part of a support system for the birth parents. They reassured parents that their job was to keep their children safe, secure, and loved. "If we work together, your child is probably going to come home a lot sooner than if we don't." Earned trust, they realized, is the key to a successful co-parenting relationship.

Types of Boundaries

Boundaries can be divided into three distinct categories. *Emotional boundaries* entail managing a child's feelings and expectations between all caregivers. *Physical boundaries* may refer to appropriate physical contact, supervision of visits, personal space, and belongings. *Communication boundaries* cover the frequency, timing, and types of communication that should be expected and help ensure that communication remains appropriate and constructive.

Clear guidelines regarding boundaries can help provide structure and prevent misunderstandings. When boundaries are established from the outset, all adults involved understand their role in working cooperatively while keeping the child's best interest first. What indicates the need for boundaries in a co-parenting relationship?

- Providing stability as the child's long-term placement is considered
- To prevent confusing or undermining the child
- The temporary nature of the arrangement
- Maintaining objectivity to make the best decisions
- Avoiding blurred parenting roles

Establishing Boundaries

First, this will work most smoothly when all adults in the situation can communicate clearly, respect each other's roles in the relationship, be flexible and adaptable, understand the right to privacy on both sides, and can put the child's best interest at the center. If you think this will be a struggle, ask a professional on the child's team for help. A social worker or therapist can mediate conflicts, offer a different perspective, and provide strategies to cope with the boundaries once they have been set.

Here are some questions to think about during this boundary-setting process:

- How will you answer questions about the family story or background of the children in your care?
- How much personal information will both families share with each other? Will you want to limit communication to only child-related issues and avoid personal sharing?
- How will birthdays, holidays, and other special occasions be handled?
- What type of contact do you prefer? For example, do you prefer phone calls or emails? What about contact via social media? Is texting easiest for you?
- How frequently will you communicate? Are there limits on the number of calls per week or time of day? Is it necessary to have limits on communication?
- Do you agree to refrain from discussing private matters of the placement or personal situations with the child?
- What compromise will be needed regarding parenting approaches like discipline and rule-setting?
- Is setting regular status updates regarding the child a good idea?

Boundaries in Action

Boundaries will look different in every case. Here is an example of a birth mom and foster mom working together. In the interview [It Takes a Village: In Foster Care, Healthy Co-parenting is the Key to a Healthy Child](#), Kristy and Amanda share their positive co-parenting experiences and give a glimpse into their thought processes. Foster Parent Kristy shares that initially, she was scared to meet Amanda. She feared that Amanda wouldn't like her and wouldn't think she could care for her son. When they met, the first thing Kristy said to Amanda was, "I am here to help you get your family back. Let me know what I can do to help with that." Kristy also let Amanda know she could contact her son whenever she wanted. That immediately calmed Amanda. Unfortunately, she had experiences with other foster families in the past where boundaries were extremely strict, and she often felt looked down upon or misunderstood. Kristy asked Amanda what she would like to see in her relationship with her son and how she could help Amanda achieve that.

Adjusting Boundaries

As time passes and situations change, you may want to periodically reassess what is working well or needs adjustment, as well as how the boundaries are affecting all families involved. When revisiting the boundaries becomes necessary, be open, flexible, and understanding as you help this family overcome complex circumstances.

What happens when boundaries are crossed? The best course is to have a conversation about what

happened. Was something unclear? Was more information needed to facilitate a full understanding? You may be able to approach such discussions with the other adults directly, or you may need to involve a case manager for additional support. We encourage you to approach such conversations from a place of understanding and respect. Make sure all parents have an equal say.

Good boundaries provide stability and structure for the child in care. As long as the boundaries are clearly defined, mutually agreed upon, and respected by both parties, the shared goal of doing what is best for the child will be achieved. Setting compassionate emotional boundaries, firm physical boundaries, and thoughtful communication boundaries will allow all essential adults in a child's life to prevent misunderstandings, model healthy relationships, and, most importantly, put the child first.

Resources

Tip Sheet
- [Shared Parenting: Putting the Needs of the Child First](#)

From the [Resource Library](#)
- Virtual Resource Kit: [Working With Birth Parents](#)
- [Shared Parenting Starts With Strong Communication Skills](#)
- *Grandparents as Parents: A Survival Guide for Raising a Second Family,* by Sylvie de Toledo & Deborah Edler Brown

Learn in [the Champion Classrooms](#)
- [Co-Parenting Through Connection Hybrid Experience](#)
- [Foster Parents Supporting Birth Parents: Considerations for Success](#)
- [Working in Partnership With Birth Parents](#)

Inspiration & Hope From [No Matter What Families](#)
- [Fostering the Family](#)