

Setting Limits with Young Children

When children are under stress they lose their patience, their love of fun, their easygoing ability to make each day a good one. At these times, they tend to do things that don't make sense. They'll begin to squabble, to insist on having things someone else has, or to want one thing after another, without gaining satisfaction.

At times like these, caregivers can play a very positive role. We can *set limits* on children's behavior in order to help them relieve the stress they are under and regain their innate good judgment and joy in cooperation. When you think a child is being unreasonable, here are three (3) steps to follow:

Listen

Get down so you are at eye level, and simply ask, "What's going on?" Ask the child to tell you why she is yelling, or why she has to have the blue cup that Tommy has. She needs to talk about the upset she feels, if possible, to someone who isn't upset too.

Limit

If she is insisting on unreasonable behavior, you must step in. Tell her what you think is reasonable, and then make sure that her unreasonable behavior doesn't continue. If the child is yelling at her friend, ask her to stop. If she can't stop, pick her up gently and bring her with you into another area of the room. If she's throwing toys, put your hand on the toy she's about to throw, and say, "I won't let you throw that." If she is insisting on amassing all the play dough for herself, bring her into your lap, away from the play dough, and tell her, "Not all of it. The others want some too." No punishment is needed, no lectures are needed, and no harshness is needed. Simply step in. Children who are under stress can't think well. They can't process what we tell them, so they don't do what we ask. You must expect this, and step in, gently but firmly, to see that they don't continue to do irrational things.

Listen

This is the "stress release" step—the one that will help the child immensely. After you have stepped in to prevent the child from doing things that don't make sense, she will most likely begin to cry, storm, or tantrum. This is constructive. It is the child's way of getting rid of the tension that made her unreasonable in the first place. If you can stay close while she cries or storms, she will continue until she has regained her ability to listen, to be cooperative, and to make the best of the situation at hand.

Adapted with permission from Hand in Hand Parenting. www.handinhandparenting.org