

Holiday Boundaries

Protecting children's boundaries — and helping friends and relatives do the same, during the holidays and all year long.

By Erika Leonard, Assistant Director of Community Education

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Personal safety for children includes helping them stay safe not just physically but also emotionally. This means helping them learn to express and protect their boundaries.

One of my favorite childhood holiday memories brings me back to the age of eight, being tickled by my uncle whom I rarely saw, a man who approached superhuman status in my mind. I would escape the tickles, regain my breath, and crawl back for more. I was overjoyed that he would sit on the floor, like a kid, and really BE with my brother and me. I loved every moment and am grateful for the memory.

For many of us -- and certainly for many children -- the holiday season rides in on a wave of touch and attention that takes a multitude of forms: hugging, kissing, cuddling, tickling, wrestling, and dancing. The stroking of hair, the holding of hands, and the lifting up of small children can weave our families closer together in celebration. The sharing of stories and asking of questions can re-connect us with those we love.

At the same time, touch and attention have the potential to be irritating, invasive, offensive, or downright hurtful. Sometimes just the sheer volume of touch and attention during the holiday season can overwhelm us so that we feel our boundaries are crumbling, getting buried, or simply being ignored. We can feel irritable, angry, sad, or depressed. These are not the experiences we want for our children, and we can take steps to protect boundaries and personal safety for children during holiday gatherings.

Even with the complexity of family dynamics and of our own personal feelings during the holiday season, we can support our children in order to maximize their joy in connecting with others, validate and reinforce their boundaries, and keep them safe.

1. Know Your Child's Needs and Plan for Them

Many children are shy, slow to smile, or reluctant to hug when relatives and friends come to visit on special occasions. You can be prepared to jump cheerfully into conversation with the friend who has asked your shy five-year-old a question without noticing that she just can't seem to answer. Help direct overwhelming attention off your child and onto other things -- the football game on TV, the table of appetizers, conversation with you about absolutely anything. Make time for success-based practice of age-appropriate skills to re-direct hugging or cheek-pinching relatives.

Personal safety for children includes skills for being with people they know as well as skills for being with strangers. Perhaps your outgoing children shock and worry you with their willingness to disappear into a crowd of strangers at a large party or to take every guest up into their rooms on their own. Be upbeat, cheerful, and clear about boundaries in advance: "We're going to meet lots of strangers at this party. I hope you enjoy yourself! You can talk with anyone you want inside the house, but check first with me before you go out in the yard." Or, "We're going to entertain our guests downstairs tonight. If there's something special you want to show someone in your room, check first with me." Then, role-play so your child has actually practiced doing this.

2. Provide Boundary-Setting Backup

Teach your child to express boundaries clearly and respectfully. Do this in part by expressing your own boundaries clearly and respectfully. This means that your child can say, "Please don't hug me right now," with confidence that you will respect the boundary and that you, as the parent, can say, "Please don't jump on me right now," with a similar expectation.

Then, know that even if your family encourages and respects clear and respectful expressions of boundaries, many people you encounter will fail to recognize those boundaries, ignore them, or take them as a personal insult. Your children may need your back-up when they are attempting to set boundaries.

You may find yourself, for example, watching your child getting tickled by a relative and begging for the tickling to stop. Though you may feel embarrassed about stepping in or worried about offending the relative, personal safety for children often relies on adults' willingness to take action. One possible approach could be to say cheerfully and clearly, "WHOA! Game's over! I hear him saying STOP!" and then to help your child to get space by asking for his help in another room.

3. Be Proactive to Promote Personal Safety for Children

If you know the behavior of certain friends and relatives can be a challenge, talking about and practicing upbeat, age-appropriate plans in advance can help make the interactions more positive. For example, you could say:

"Every year, Grandma seems to spend a lot of time trying to test your reading and math skills, and you don't seem to like it. What could you try?" (Practice comments to say to Grandma, such as questions -- "Grandma, what was your favorite book when you were a kid?"; or physical redirection -- "Grandma, I want to show you...")

"Your uncle seems to like to wrestle with you. I think he thinks that's a good way to get closer to you, which is OK if you like it. When you don't like it, do you think you can show him another way to be together?" (Practice saying, "I don't want to wrestle, but I **do** want you to play basketball with me," and walking away to get the ball.)

Personal safety for children can benefit from additional practice of skills during holidays and other gatherings. With some planning, practicing, and a willingness to back our children up when necessary, we

can help them develop confidence and skills that can make their holiday interactions with friends and family even more enjoyable.