

## Teenpower Boundaries With People You Know

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**"Your safety and well-being are more important than *anyone's* embarrassment, inconvenience, or offense!"**

-Ellen Bass, Co-Author of *The Courage to Heal* and Founding Board President of Kidpower

### Boundaries for Teens

If you are under 18 in the United States, you are not legally an adult. This means that you have less legal rights than adults do about what is and is not your choice. However, you do have many legal protections for your safety and you do have many choices.

### Boundary Principles

1. We each belong to ourselves. — I belong to myself - my body, my time, my feelings, my personal space, my thoughts, my spirit, all of me. And other people belong to themselves.
2. Some things are not a choice. My family, school, coach, and/or employer have rules that I must follow or there will be consequences. I can speak up but I cannot always control what other people will think, feel, say, or do. I can set boundaries, leave, or seek help if others harm my health or safety. I cannot always control whether a situation or relationship at home, at school, with friends, or at work will get better.
3. Problems should not be secrets – and neither should touch, teasing, gifts, or favors.
4. Keep telling until you get help. Getting help can mean -- asking the person who is creating the problem to change his/her behavior; talking to someone who is in a position of authority to solve the problem; gathering with other people to deal with the problem together; asking for personal support from someone outside the situation completely; or even taking legal action.

### What Makes it Hard to Set Boundaries?

1. Internalized beliefs: not worth it, have no right, dangerous to say no, my role is to please others.
2. Triggers: emotions, behaviors, thoughts, and words that cause us to explode with feelings.

3. Longing to belong: wishing to be accepted, loved, wanted, or included by another person or a group.
4. Having grown up in a home where appropriate boundary-setting was not allowed.

### Effective Communication of Boundaries With People We Know

Communication and conflict-resolution programs teach people to set boundaries by talking about their own feelings, the other person's specific behavior that is a problem for them, and the specific behavior from the other person they want to see. Figure out what you want! Although you will find ways to state your boundaries in your own words, practicing with the following model can help you organize your thoughts:

- I feel ... (state your feeling in terms that are all yours rather than attacking the other person)
- When you ... (state the specific behavior that is a problem to you; try not to use words like "you never" or "you always")
- Would you please ... (say what you specifically want the person to do)

You might say to a parent, "I feel frustrated when you interrupt and sound angry when I try to explain a problem to you. Would you please listen to me first and then tell me what you want to say in a regular voice?" Or, "I feel irritated when you insist on helping me. Would you please let me do it myself?" Or, "I feel upset when you yell at me and look so angry. Would you please just tell me what I did wrong in a calm way?" You might say to someone living with you, "I feel annoyed when you use my stuff. Please ask first."

You might say to a teacher, coach, youth group leader, or boss, "I feel nervous when you give me criticism while I am learning something hard for me. Would you please give me time to get better?" Or, "I feel upset when you expect me to stay after \_\_\_\_\_ (school, work or other activity) because something comes up at the last moment. Would you please make a plan so that I can finish during our regular hours?"

You might say to a friend, "I feel irritated when you get upset that I am hanging out with someone else. Would you please understand that I want to do some things without you?" Or, "I feel hurt when you get so mad about a misunderstanding. Would you please accept that mistakes happen?" Or, "I feel unheard when you jump in with suggestions or start telling me about your problems when I am unhappy. Would you please just listen?" Or, "I feel sad when you talk (or act) as if I am not there. Would you please include me as being important?"

You might say to a date, "I feel pressured when you start making sexual advances before I feel ready. Would you please ask me first?" Or, "I feel pressured when you act disappointed because I said, 'No.' Would you please accept my 'No' gracefully?" You might say to a friend, teacher, boss, or family member, "I feel uncomfortable when you make sexual jokes (or other prejudicial sexist, homophobic, racist, etc. remarks). Please stop doing this in my presence."

As an alternative to "I feel", you might say, "It concerns me when ..."

### Common Reactions to Boundaries

It is normal for people to dislike being told what to do. Be prepared to deal with negative reactions such as:

1. Denial: "I never did/said/meant that...You misunderstood me."
2. Minimizing: "You're overreacting... You are so sensitive...You are making a big deal out of nothing... It was just a joke...Don't you have a sense of humor?" ... "I am sorry this [insulting/unfair remark or action that you are setting boundaries about] was so hard for you to hear."
3. Counterattacking with emotional coercion including guilt, blame, or putting words in your mouth: "So, you're saying I only think about myself/am no good/that you don't like me ...How can you say that to

me...Don't you care about me...You are just saying this because you only think of yourself...I will not be okay unless I get my way ... You will make me leave/get sick/get hurt/kill myself ... You're jealous... You're crazy... You have too many problems...You're defensive."

4. Denying your right to have a boundary: "I will do whatever I want. You can't stop me. You HAVE to do what I want or else you will lose --our relationship/your job/money/time with your friends...I am your boss/parent/teacher/friend and you must do what I say...I'll hurt you! ... JUST SHUT UP!"
5. Being so devastated that you feel tempted to take care of him or her: "I am so awful for saying that.... I am sure you won't want anything to do with me anymore.... I am just too messed up to be with anyone...I hate myself for having done that... I can't deal with this.... I can't talk about this anymore."

### **Possible Responses**

First, get centered. Instead of reacting automatically by getting mad or giving up, you can decide what to do. You can:

1. Acknowledge feelings. "You sound upset." ... "I appreciate your concern."
2. Express caring. "You are important to me even though I don't like what you did."
3. Restate your boundary: "This is important to me because \_\_\_\_\_. I feel...when you.... would you please...." ... "Now that you have told me your feelings, I do not want to have you bring this up again."
4. Find a common ground. "Let's see if we can find a solution that will meet both our needs...Perhaps we misunderstood each other...What do you think you said/meant/did? This is what I think I said/meant/did." ... "I am sorry this upset you. I would like to talk when you feel ready to listen."
5. State a consequence that is realistic and balanced. "Stop or I will leave...Stop or you have to leave...Stop or I will report you.... This behavior needs to change or our relationship will need to change."
6. Take a break and try again later. "Let's give ourselves some time to calm down so we can think more clearly.... Let's get some rest and try to talk when we are less tired."
7. Leave quietly and get help. If someone is threatening or violent or any time your personal safety is at risk, leaving is almost always the safest thing to do. Making threats about fighting back is dangerous.
8. Request clarification. "I am confused. What was your purpose was in making that comment?"
9. Write it down. Writing things down gets people's attention and creates documentation if you need it.
10. As a last resort, know when and how to use physical self-defense. If you are in danger and cannot get away safely, remember that you have the choice to defend yourself physically, leave, and get help.

### **Feelings That Can Get in The Way of Setting Boundaries in Real Life**

Our organization's underlying principle is that safety and well-being are more important than embarrassment, inconvenience, or offense. However, most people really to be embarrassed, to embarrass most other people, to be bothered when they are busy, to bother most other busy people, to have someone mad at them, or to be feeling angry at others. This means that in real life, embarrassment, inconvenience, and offense can be powerful feelings that get in the way of taking care of your emotional and physical safety. This is why it is important to practice how to set boundaries to protect yourself in situations that might bring up these feelings.