

A - C - T Limit Setting

WHAT

“When limits should be set but they are not, children are deprived of the opportunity to learn something important about themselves.”

Dr Landreth

Some children act out more than others, but it is always stressful for both the adult and the child when they do. Before children can resist their first impulses, they must have an awareness of their behaviour, a feeling of responsibility, and the experience of self-control.

It is important to address the child’s behaviour in a way that he or she can understand. Children’s brains are different from adult brains, so we need to be able to communicate limits and consequences in a child-appropriate manner. A favourite way to do this both in therapy and in the home is with the A-C-T model. It was developed by Dr. Garry Landreth, it involves three simple, adaptable steps:

A • C • T

A = Acknowledge the Feeling

C = Communicate the Limit

T = Target the Choice

WHY

The purpose of limits is to teach, not to punish, while also effectively illustrating taking

responsibility for yourself. Which is important because responsibility accompanies decision-making. As a result of these limit-setting techniques, children learn to become responsible for themselves and their behaviour.

Set limits that fit within your household rules, but allow for more freedom, more exploration and more expression. Determine your own limits ahead of time and before setting a limit, ask yourself:

***“Is this limit necessary”
and before allowing a behaviour, ask yourself
“Can I consistently allow this”***

HOW

Acknowledge the feeling. Letting a child know that you know how they are feeling helps them to feel heard and understood. Acknowledging emotions also helps an upset child address their feelings and can help them calm down faster.

“I know that you are angry and want to hit me...”

Communicate the limit. It is alright for a child to have feelings, but it is not appropriate for them to behave destructively or inappropriately. After validating their emotions, let them know that what they are doing is *not* OK. Be sure to word the limit so that you are saying “no” to the behaviour and not to the child themselves. For example, instead of

saying, “You can’t throw that, you can say.
“...but I am not for hitting.”

This puts the focus on the child’s action rather than their feeling or person. Behaviours are easier for a child to change than feelings are, which is why the third step is to offer choices of other ways to behave.

Target acceptable alternatives. Simply telling a child “no” can lead them to feeling frustrated. They are trying to deal with their emotions and need to learn how to handle them safely. Offer other ways they can express themselves that are acceptable to you. It is also important that the child feels they have the ability to make their own choice, which helps them learn responsibility and problem solving. Offer one choice for younger children and 2-3 choices for older children and teens.

“You can choose to hit the pillow.”

The A-C-T method can also be used with teens. We often want to treat teens as adults, but their brains are not fully developed yet and they need clear communication of concrete limits like children do. Tweak the language slightly so that the teen does not feel talked down to but can still understand what you are saying. For example, ***“I know you are upset about not being able to go out with your friends tonight, but school nights are for doing homework and chores. You can choose to see your friends on Friday night or invite them to come over on Saturday.”***

