

Personal Boundaries and Internet Safety

An integral part of Internet safety involves teaching children about respecting personal boundaries. Individuals who present a risk to children usually begin by breaking boundaries with them — this is true for both the offline and online worlds. It is much more important that children be aware of people's behaviour (i.e. listening to their instincts and being aware of behaviour that seems “weird” or “creepy” to them) as opposed to relying on the traditional safety slogan, “Don't talk to strangers.”

Setting personal boundaries is about learning to take care of ourselves and letting others know how we deserve and expect to be treated.

Adults sometimes break personal boundaries with other adults by being too forward or asking questions that are too personal — these situations can often be awkward to handle. Children's experiences are no different. It can be very uncomfortable for children to manage a situation with an adult who is breaking their personal boundaries.

It is always up to adults to establish and maintain boundaries with children and to re-establish boundaries if a child crosses the line. Children should be encouraged to tell a safe adult about any inappropriate/uncomfortable or unsafe interactions they experience with adults.

What do boundaries have to do with child sexual abuse?

Individuals looking for sexual access to children often begin by breaking personal boundaries and crossing the line with them. This is not to say that all adults who break boundaries with children are looking for sexual access. Nonetheless, it is inappropriate and children need to understand how to know when someone is breaking boundaries. Children who are aware of their own personal boundaries are more likely to recognize when someone is crossing them. This can reduce their risk of being victimized and increase the likelihood that they tell someone what happened.

How and when do parents begin to discuss personal boundaries with children?

I. Start early

Building personal boundaries should begin when children are very young. It is typical for kids to break boundaries regularly as they are trying to figure out who they are. Point out and explain to your child when s/he has crossed the line with others. Re-establishing boundaries should be an ongoing practice.



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II. Fully explain what boundaries are

Boundaries can be described as personal space that needs to be respected around:

- Our bodies
- Our thoughts
- Our personal things
- Our privacy
- Our exposure to things
- Our roles (child vs. adult)

You can refer to the examples below to help explain to your child the difference between breaking boundaries and respecting boundaries.

Examples of children breaking boundaries:

- Continuing to touch someone who shows discomfort
- Asking personal questions when you do not know someone well (online or offline)
- Asking personal questions in front of others to embarrass a person
- Making fun of a person
- Putting a person down
- Making sexual remarks about a person and embarrassing her/him
- Answering questions on behalf of an adult
- Wanting to be a part of adult conversations that deal with adult topics
- Acting “in charge” of parents and siblings, or other adults and peers
- Wanting access to adult material and information (e.g. movies, TV shows, websites, etc.)
- Walking in on someone changing
- Sending or posting personal pictures of others



Personal Boundaries and Internet Safety (cont'd)

Examples of children respecting boundaries:

- Respecting when someone doesn't want to be touched
- Stopping a behaviour that is bothering someone when asked to stop
- Asking permission before using something that belongs to another person
- Giving someone privacy to change or use the bathroom
- Respecting someone's private thoughts rather than demanding to know something that a person doesn't want to share
- Refusing to forward inappropriate emails or text messages, including pictures
- Declining to ask others questions that are too personal

III. Practice what you preach: Don't break boundaries

Adults who respect children's personal boundaries help reinforce how children should expect to be treated. When adults break children's personal boundaries, it compromises their sense of safety and security.

Examples of adults breaking emotional boundaries:

- Using shame (e.g. "I can't believe you would do that! What kind of a person are you?")
- Using sarcasm (e.g. "Way to go Einstein. A two-year-old knows how to do that.")
- Using guilt (e.g. "I do so much for you. Can't you do this one thing for me?")
- Demeaning someone (e.g. "You may as well quit. You have no talent anyway." or "Have another donut. Looks like you could use one.")
- Asking very personal questions to a child

Examples of adults breaking role boundaries:

- Contacting children on a personal level without parental permission
- Placing a child in the role of an adult's confidant/best friend ("I am so lonely. I am glad you are here to listen to me.")
- Asking children for pictures without parental permission



Personal Boundaries and Internet Safety (cont'd)

Examples of adults breaking physical boundaries:

- Insisting children hug or kiss others
- Continuing to touch a child when they don't want you to (excluding emergency situations)
- Being excessively affectionate and not responding to a child's signs of discomfort
- Hitting a child

Examples of adults breaking sexual boundaries:

- Telling children sexual jokes
- Showing children sexually graphic pictures
- Sharing adult-level sexual information with children
- Engaging in sexual activity in the presence of children
- Engaging in sexual activity with children
- Sharing personal sexual stories with children
- Telling children sexually explicit jokes
- Engaging in sexual conversations within earshot of a child
- Watching pornography in the presence of a child
- Sending sexual texts or emails to a child
- Sending children sexual pictures



Personal Boundaries and Internet Safety (cont'd)

IV. Guidelines you can use to help teach your child about personal boundaries

1. Model appropriate boundaries for your child and re-establish boundaries when they are broken. If your child invades personal space, asks personal questions or misplaces their authority with an adult, supportively re-establish the boundaries by explaining the appropriate behaviour expected.
2. Teach your child to respect personal space and privacy. Establish family privacy rules for using the bathroom, bathing and changing. Designate a personal space in the home for each person's belongings (e.g. a bedroom, closet, drawers, shelves, etc.).
3. Establish and reinforce the role of your child within the family. Establish boundaries when your child wants to listen to adult conversations pertaining to adult decision-making and adult-related topics. Children should be separated from adult issues.
4. Avoid involving your child in adult relationship issues such as intimacy trouble. This clarifies the child's role in the family and builds their security.
5. Teach your child the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships online and offline, including both friendship and dating relationships.
6. Teach your child how to protect personal information when using technology and how to stay safe online.
7. Encourage your child to tell you when they think others, including adults, are breaking her/his boundaries.

