

# SELF-STUDY COURSE

## Fostering Skills: Boundaries in Foster Care

July 2001

2.5 Training Hours

This self-study is based on the following sources:

**Working with Aggressive Youth: A Sourcebook For Child Care Providers** Boys  
Town Press, Boys Town, Nebraska, 1989

**Rebuilding Children's Lives.** Boys Town Press, Boys Town, Nebraska, 1996

**Maintaining Boundaries** Child Welfare League of America

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# ***FOSTERING SKILLS:***

## ***Boundaries In Foster Care***

### ***What Do We Mean By Maintaining Boundaries?***

A boundary is simply where one thing stops and another begins. We often mark boundaries with fences or lot lines or rivers or buildings. Personal boundaries are where one person's physical and emotional being stops and another begins. Boundaries are important in foster care because so many children come from environments where their personal boundaries have been violated or disrespected (such as in abuse or neglect). Many of these children have developed behaviors that demonstrate they have not internalized appropriate boundaries. Boundaries are an important skill learned throughout childhood. A toddler's *no* or *me do it* establishes his own identity separate from his parents and begins a sense of *me* that is important to good mental health. When children are physically abused, their sense of well-being is violated. When children are neglected or psychologically mistreated, their internal sense of well-being is also violated. Many of these children have trouble feeling whole and safe within their own bodies. Many have difficulties in social relationship. As adults, they often find themselves in relationships where they are taken advantage of or relationships where they take advantage of others. Boundaries are basically a sense of safety and respect for ourselves and others.

Think of boundaries as a mental map of where our needs end and another person's needs begin. Boundaries allow us to protect ourselves from stress, physical injury and situations that are uncomfortable. They also allow us to have relationships with others without being hurt, misused or damaged. They also prevent us from hurting or misusing others. Boundaries are flexible— families tend to be more fluid in their boundaries with each other than strangers at the airport. But healthy families still respect the boundaries of safety and respect for all members in their family.

Many children come into foster care with very poor boundaries. Healthy boundaries were not always maintained in their families so they have not had a chance to internalize boundaries. Many of the behavior difficulties you deal with result at least in part from poor boundaries. Unless you are clear about your boundaries, you could end up causing additional harm to your foster child or your own family. **First**, as a foster parent, you need to be able to recognize when a child (a system, or you) is having boundary problems. To help a child with his behavior, we need to help him develop appropriate boundaries. **Second**, a foster parent must be able to set and maintain personal boundaries between parent and child and set boundaries for the health of the entire family. If you can't establish boundaries for yourself, you'll either burnout, hurt yourself, go crazy or hurt a child. **Third**, a foster parent should be able to assist a child in establishing and maintaining his boundaries so he doesn't hurt himself, hurt others ... or drive you crazy!

## **Part One: Recognizing Boundary Problems**

Boundaries are important both for foster parents and the children in the home. Children are more likely to be successful in their placement if a child can gradually incorporate good boundaries and self-care. When we as foster parents have healthy boundaries, we are more likely to keep ourselves from burning out and less likely to cross over lines of safety and abuse.

Boundaries impact our relationships to people around us. These include how emotionally close we get to people, how we protect ourselves, and how responsible we are in our actions toward others. We have **internal** boundaries that determine how we view ourselves in relationships to others, and **external** boundaries that separate our physical selves. These boundaries are related to how we interact with others.

You may have often heard that a foster parent should take care to maintain good boundaries in their families. When a person enters a family system, they enter a culture of how people are expected to relate to each other. The person coming into the family also brings his own experience of relating to others for better or worse. Some children have poor boundaries as a result of abuse or neglect. They may have trouble with attachment and bonding (*the distant child*) or the child may be parentified and take care of others in their family (*the enmeshed child*.) A child's behavior may be telling the foster family of his need to learn how to internalize boundaries.

### ***How Can I Identify Children Who Have Poor Boundaries?***

Do you feel smothered by this child? Do you feel as if the child doesn't even know you are there? These are two good clues that you are dealing with boundary issues. Boundaries are often difficult for children who have attachment difficulties or disorders. They either crave too much or too little connection with other. They have trouble honoring or being aware of the privacy of the other person or else have trouble recognizing their own boundaries and needs.

*Kayla would not let her foster mother out of sight. She always had to have her attention, and even when her foster mother sent her into the other room to play, she always drifted back into the room with a request for water, or a hug, or to say she had hurt herself. She always wanted to sit on her foster mother's lap, and would push other children out of the way if they already were there.*

#### ***The Enmeshed Child:***

*Enmeshment means a person so closely identifies with another or seeks acceptance or intimacy, that his or her boundaries are not clear. When they don't feel that intense closeness, they may panic or feel rejected. Enmeshment often leads to an intense emotional dependency that leaves children open to abuse in relationship. Enmeshed children are often parentified and feel overly responsible for their parents.*

#### ***The Distant Child:***

*Emotionally distant children fail to connect with others. They don't seem to need others and often appear cold. They seem insensitive to others feelings and seem to lack empathy. They don't let themselves get close to others. These children often have trouble with attachment and bonding.*

Children with cognitive difficulties such as fetal alcohol syndrome often have trouble with boundaries. These children don't always recognize the social clues that they have invaded another person's comfort zone. Or their impulsiveness does not give them time to think how their actions are going to affect others. Other signs that a child may be having boundary problems may include:

- *Children who do not know how to respect other people's things*
- *Children who want to always touch or hug or kiss other children or adults*
- *Children who constantly need attention or praise or acknowledgement or who are constantly engaging your attention through misbehavior*
- *Children who consistently invade another person's drawers or use their things without asking*
- *Children who don't seem to have a self-protective urge about themselves, such as not afraid of strangers, wander off easily, participate in high risk activities or put themselves in dangerous situations*
- *Children who tell strangers about abuse or want to go home with them*
- *Older children who ask very personal questions or ask personal questions in public places*

**EXERCISE #1: To review the information presented above, complete the following questions.**

1. The \_\_\_\_\_ child fails to connect with others, seem insensitive to others feelings and seem to lack empathy.
2. The \_\_\_\_\_ child so closely identifies with another or seeks acceptance or intimacy, that her boundaries are not clear.
3. Two good clues that you are dealing with boundary issues include feeling \_\_\_\_\_ by a child or feeling as if the child \_\_\_\_\_.

## ***Recognizing your Own Boundaries***

Do you find yourself:

- *Snooping in your child's drawers to find out what is going on?*
- *Reading personal journals or letters?*
- *Asking very personal questions of a child or a birth parent?*
- *Feeling resentful because a child does not appreciate you?*
- *Making most of the decisions for another person even though they can make them themselves?*
- *Involving yourself in other people's business even when it does not involve you?*
- *Quizzing children and asking lots of questions about what happens during a visit or what a caseworker said?*
- *Agreeing to do things even though you don't want to and it's going to put an extra burden on your family?*
- *Saying yes to someone, then being resentful because you felt you couldn't say no?*
- *Saying yes to someone because you feel you have to even though it sounds crazy, stupid or doesn't make sense?*
- *Agreeing to do something, then passively not doing it and avoiding the person who asked you to do it?*
- *Sharing information about your foster child with friends, neighbors or relatives?*

All of these are related to issues of boundaries. If these are patterns in the way you relate to others, it may be a sign that you need to look closer at your own boundaries. Perhaps you don't respect the boundaries of others as well as you should (and children have boundaries that need to be respected, too). Or perhaps you are not able to keep your own boundaries of safety and well-being. Boundaries are important in foster care because all the players (social worker, foster parent, guardian ad litem, courts) have their roles to play. Foster parents have the very important job of providing a temporary, safe place for children to be until they can be in a more permanent home. If we can respect and encourage good boundaries in children, and protect ourselves, the foster care experience will be more positive for both ourselves and the children in our homes. Foster parents need to respect the boundaries of others, but also need to be guardian of their family's well-being.

## **Part Two: Setting Boundaries**

### **For Your Family And Yourself**

As a foster parent, it is very important that you are skilled in maintaining boundaries in your foster families. There are professional reasons to maintain boundaries and there are safety reasons to maintain boundaries.

#### ***Professional Reasons***

**Confidentiality:** Foster parents are required to maintain the confidentiality of information regarding children in their homes. This boundary keeps children protected and respects their integrity. Confidentiality is required by both state and federal laws. The same confidentiality laws that bind OCS social workers, also apply to foster parents regarding the children in their care. Foster parents often have very personal information about children and their families. It is important that confidentiality is respected. This means sharing information only with those who need to know for the care of the child. It means that this information should not be shared with relatives, neighbors or other foster parents.

**Staying Out Of Triangles:** A triangle happens when one person in a three part triangle try to play the other parties against each other. For example, when a birth parent tells a foster parent that a social worker said something unkind about the foster parent, the foster parent has a natural tendency to “side” with the birth parent against the social worker. But perhaps the birth parent tells the social worker the same thing! Now each side is polarized against the other, and the foster parent and social worker have been successfully manipulated against each other. Children do this, too, with social workers, foster parents, counselors, and birth parents. It is important to “own your own stuff” and work to keep communication open. “Owning your own stuff” is a phrase used in communications training to signify that we need to take responsibility for our own feelings, thoughts and actions and not blame others for why we do things.

**Maintaining Boundaries with the Agency:** Foster parents need to maintain healthy boundaries with the agency they work with. It is important to know when to say *no* to a placement. Foster parents have the right to refuse a placement if that placement will not work in their home or if they need to take a break. They have a responsibility to say no if taking that child will put them over their legal limit of number of children. You have a right to reasonable notice of visitation schedules. It is important that you always take into consideration the health and well-being of your whole family and make decisions accordingly.

It is also important to know the channels of authority, so if you are having difficulty with a social worker or want to make a complaint, you know the procedure to take. We are less effective when we take the “either or approach.” That means that either we suffer in

silence and quit instead of taking action to do the right thing for our families and our kids. Or we take a “guns-a-blazing” approach and alienate the people we are supposed to be working with by name calling or not talking about problems directly or by intentionally trying to ruin someone’s reputation through gossip or untruthful accusations. Maintaining boundaries with your agency means treat other people as you wish to be treated and don’t let people treat you otherwise. We can maintain boundaries if we learn not to take things personally, to understand the situation from the other person’s point of view, and to always keep what is best for the child at the center of our concern. It means to follow the “Rules of the Road” that are listed at the end of this self-study.

### ***Safety Reasons***

***Sexual And Romance Issues:*** It is very important for foster parents to maintain boundaries with their foster children, especially if their children are teens or if they have been victims of sexual abuse. For the safety of the child, families should have firm rules about touching, bedtime, bath time and clothing issues. Foster families should be gentle but firm with children about inappropriate touching towards others. Foster parents are also prohibited from cultivating a romantic relationship with a foster child. Adults need to be responsible for keeping the boundaries of appropriate conduct between children and adults.

***Intimate Details:*** Foster parents need to keep healthy boundaries around issues of intimate and personal details. For example, most foster parents want to be very open and honest with their children. But it would be inappropriate to be so honest, that you would feel compelled to share intimate details about your sexual relationship with a foster child just because he asked or you think it is a good learning opportunity! It is also important to maintain good boundaries (and sometimes appearances) by avoiding situations such as sleeping in the same bed, a foster father taking his foster daughter on an overnight trip alone, and adolescents sitting in a foster parent’s lap. These may in fact not lead to anything sexual or harmful, but the boundaries of safety and limits between foster parent and child has been compromised. It is important for children’s safety (and for foster parents) that healthy, firm boundaries are maintained.

***Maintaining Boundaries For Your Family Members:*** House rules, adult supervision and quick attention to inappropriate touching are all important tools to keep healthy boundaries between family members. Your children (both foster and birth) need adults to help keep a safe environment for all family members. That means you may need to set limits and rules around areas that might break the boundaries needed. For example, you may want to set a limit around sexually explicit talk or vulgar language. This limit would help prevent grooming behavior to occur. (Grooming means to gradually desensitization and coerce children into sexual activity.) If a visit is scheduled without your knowledge for a time that would interfere with an already planned family activity, the foster parent may choose to discuss a change in time in order to preserve the family activity. If a foster child is always getting into other children’s things, you may need to set a limit about not playing with others toys without permission. All of these are example of maintaining boundaries for your family members.

## ***Establishing House Rules***

It is strongly encouraged that foster homes establish boundaries in their home by establishing house rules. House rules simply refer to the general guidelines for behavior that all family members are expected to follow. House rules help establish structure and clear expectations, two very important things for foster parents trying to establish boundaries. House rules should focus on the safety and comfort of all family members. For families with young children, keep your rules simple and limited. With older children and teens, you can have more rules.

House rules that focus on safety and comfort of family members might include:

- *No using vulgar or bad language*
- *No hitting or hurting others.*
- *No harming or destroying personal property.*
- *Get permission before touching or using other people's property.*
- *When angry, use your words, not your fists.*
- *Phone calls between 6 and 9 p.m. only. No phone calls after 9 p.m.*
- *Chores and homework done before television time.*
- *Get permission before you leave the house.*
- *Always wear clothes, robe or pajamas in the house. No walking around in underwear!*
- *No sexual touching between children in the home.*

You get the idea. Try to put your house rules in the positive whenever you can, because it focuses children on positive behavior. It also sets kids up to do things that you can praise and notice. But rules don't work unless someone knows about them! So think about how you are going to get your rules across to children. Some ideas include:

- *Write out a list and post them.*
- *Post a few rules in different places around the house.*
- *When a child enters your home, have a house meeting to review the rules.*
- *Repeat the rules often, and refer back to the house rules when children forget or break the rules.*
- *With foster teens, review the rules with them, discuss them and both sign and date a copy. Give a copy to the child.*
- *Model following the rules. When you break a rule, acknowledge it and make restitution.*
- *Remind young children about rules before a new situation, going to the store or in preparation of an activity.*

The final step in helping children learn boundaries is to make sure that there is a consequence or action when house rules are broken. You don't want too many rules, but when you have a rule, make sure there is a consequence when broken. Boundaries are only boundaries when they push back a bit when you run into them. As much as possible, connect the consequence directly to the action.

| HOUSE RULE  | CONSEQUENCE WHEN BROKEN  |
|---|--|
| <b>No harming or destroying personal property:</b>      | If uses something without asking, need to replace or repair the item or need to find a way to make reparation.                           |
| <b>No hitting or hurting others:</b>                    | Need to take a time out. Then needs to find a way to make reparations or apologize to the other person.                                  |
| <b>Phone calls between 6 and 9 p.m. only:</b>           | Lose phone privileges for the next evening.  |
| <b>Chores and homework done before television time:</b> | No television time. If children watch television without doing chores, they lose time the next night or need to complete an extra chore. |

Got it? Now you try it!

***exercise #2:* Write three of your house rules in the left column. In the right column, write c corresponding consequence for each one.**

| HOUSE RULE | CONSEQUENCE WHEN BROKEN |
|------------|-------------------------|
| 1.         | 1.                      |
| 2.         | 2.                      |
| 3.         | 3.                      |

## **Part Three: Helping Children Learn And Respect Boundaries**

### ***Modeling Respect For Boundaries.***

The first way to help a child learn boundaries is one we already talked about. Establish house rules and structure in your home so children learn how to act. An equally powerful way to teach boundaries to a child is through modeling. How you act and how you treat people is the first and most powerful model your children have. When foster children enter your family, they may have seen adults acting in many harmful ways. Your model of behavior sets a standard of how you expect others to act. If you are respectful, deal with your anger and disappointment in positive ways, and help model assertive, not aggressive or passive behavior, you give your foster children a model of how you want them to act. When you knock on a door before entering, let someone know when their touch is inappropriate, or resolve conflicts in a positive way, you model boundaries for your foster child. If you treat birth parents and social workers with respect, children learn to trust these people and treat them with respect as well.

### ***Teaching Boundaries Around Touch***

Boys Town is a treatment foster parent program that works with emotionally disturbed children. The Boys Town program spends time helping child learn boundaries and appropriate ways of interacting with other. For a child who constantly wants to touch others, some suggestions from the Boys Town Training Manual **Rebuilding Children's Lives** might be helpful.

- If a child wants to be hugged constantly, suggest and encourage that he hugs you a limited amount, such as four hugs a day.
- Teach the child how to ask before he or she hugs you.
- Teach a child about personal circles (for younger children, draw pictures and color in the “circles” or trace your child’s body onto butcher paper and draw a halo or circle around the tracing.) One is your personal space that you only invite family and friends into. The next is a larger circle where you shake peoples hands or pat their backs. And the next is a more distant space, where you may only wave at people or talk to people you don’t know well at a distance.
- Teach the child about personal space. That is, teach a child to stand an arm’s length away while talking with others

If a child has been sexually abused and needs to learn to feel safe within his own body, you will need to use special care and sensitivity. Ask permission to touch a child, such as, “I’m so proud of you, I’d like to give you a hug. Would that be okay?” If the child says not, or seems to move away from you, answer back. “Looks like you don’t want a hug right now. That’s okay— maybe later..” This models respect and helps a child feel

good about establishing his own boundaries. Establish firm and clear house rules (see below) around issues of clothing, bath, bedtime, touching, and toileting to help children feel safe in their environment.

### ***Teaching Social Skills***

Part of the Boys Town program is to teach children social skills so that they can be successful and can learn positive behaviors to replace the old ones. When you are helping children learn and respect boundaries, focusing on positive social skills can be very helpful. The Boys Town program takes a social skill and breaks it down into steps. Then, at a time when the child is calm, teaches one step at a time, talking about the reason why acting this way is better than acting a destructive or negative way. The child practices, and the foster parent gives feedback. At the end of the practice, the child is reminded to use his skill. If he uses it, the foster parent praises him, so that the child will be more likely to repeat it.

Remember, a social skill is an appropriate way for a child to relate to others and get his needs met in a way that is generally acceptable. Sometimes, we have to go back to the basics and teach children skills they should have learned when they were in the preschool age. When teaching, pick a time that is calm and explain to the child that you are going to teach him some skills that will help him get along better and not get in so much trouble. Break the skill into step and explain what you want him to do. Practice. *Make it fun!* Use funny names or funny situations to practice. Then pick a real life situation from school or home and practice again. Practicing social skills do not guarantee that a child will be able to follow through, but it certainly gives him a better chance to be successful.

### ***Common Social Skills Related To Boundaries:***

#### ***Accepting Criticism***

1. Look at the person
2. Remain calm and quiet while the person is talking
3. Show that you understand
4. Try to correct the problem

#### ***Disagreeing with Others***

1. Remain calm
2. Look at the person
3. Begin with a positive or neutral statement
4. Explain why you disagree with the decision
5. Listen as the other person gives their side of the story
6. Calmly accept whatever decision is made
7. Thank the person for listening, regardless of the outcome

**Accepting No**

1. Look at the person
2. Say “Okay”
3. Calmly ask for a reason if you really don’t understand
4. If you disagree, bring it up later

**Staying Calm**

1. Take a deep breath
2. Relax your muscle
3. Tell yourself to be calm or count to 10
4. Share your feelings
5. Try to solve the situation that made you upset

You get the idea. You are “pre-teaching” ways for children to learn to accept no, to disagree without getting in trouble, and to be more pleasant to be around. When we teach children and adolescents these skills, they are more likely to use them! Plus, they learn how to maintain their own boundaries while respecting the boundaries of others. Practice with children and teens. Give feedback of how they might do better. Then praise them and remind them to use their skills.

**EXERCISE #3: To review the information presented above, complete the following questions.**

1. Teaching children how to act through setting an example is called \_\_\_\_\_.
2. If a child wants to constantly held and hugged, what would be one way of helping him learn some boundaries?
3. Part of the Boys Town program is to teach children \_\_\_\_\_- \_\_\_\_\_ so that they can be successful and so that they can learn \_\_\_\_\_ behaviors to replace the old ones.
4. What are the four steps to the skill of Accepting Criticism?

It is unclear who wrote “The Rules of the Road” but these rules summarize this section on boundaries perfectly. These are great guidelines to guiding and maintaining boundaries as a foster parent, whether dealing with your kids, other foster parents or social workers. Share them with others! Share them with your kids! Make them part of your family and your personal way of relating with people in your life.

## **The Rules of the Road**

1. Go to the source.
2. Own your part of the issue.
3. Use “I” statements.
4. Hold no grudges.
5. Show respect—on an individual, professional, and team level.
6. Deal in the present.
7. Show basic courtesy.
8. Invest in each other (provide support).
9. Respect differences.
10. Be an active listener. Acknowledge others’ thoughts and feelings.
11. If it doesn’t work, say so.
12. No reprisals or “Gotcha’s!”
13. Be authentic.
14. Don’t take everything personally.
15. It’s okay to take care of self and set limits with others.
16. Honor confidentiality.
17. No gossiping or feeding into rumors.